

LONG ISLAND ADVOCACY CENTER

**2023 – 2024
Report**

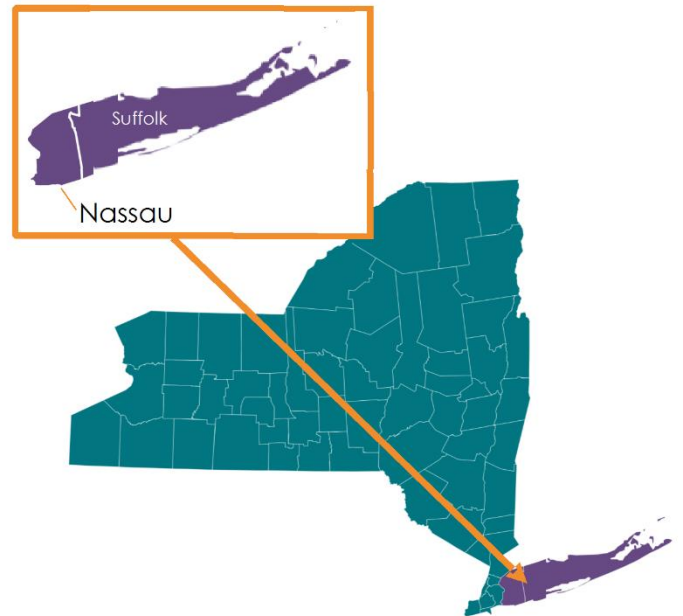
OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The Long Island Advocacy Center (LIAC) works with families, students, and individuals with disabilities by ensuring the protection of their legal rights within the public education system in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties on Long Island. We continue to serve low-income families whose children attend public schools and experience school related problems. An area of focus for LIAC continues to be assisting students who are considered at-risk. We provide educational advocacy and legal assistance to families and students across Long Island, to address school related problems, including but not limited to truancy/school avoidance, discipline and suspensions, residency and enrollment, Special Education services, English Language Learner services, and dropout prevention.

The aftermath of COVID-19 continued to exacerbate the problems for these students as the pandemic highlighted the obstacles and poor educational outcomes for at-risk youth. While most schools recognized the additional emotional toll students experienced, many were not equipped to appropriately support the fallout of learning loss and emotional stress. LIAC saw an increase in school failures, trancies, and disciplinary problems across all students that we serve. LIAC continued our outreach efforts by creating and presenting webinars to educate and outreach to parents and community-based service providers regarding the educational rights of families and students during COVID-19 and the return to school.

Throughout the year, LIAC assisted thousands of students and families. Our attorneys provided legal assistance and/or representation to 1,062 students, including:

- 946 brief service; legal counsel and advice or limited action;



Service Area: Long Island

Population Served: Low Income Children and Families

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:

Total Staff: 19	Lawyers: 5
Paralegals: 12	Others: 2

- 100 students received negotiated settlements without litigation; and
- 16 students received litigated settlements.

Our education advocates provided non-litigated advocacy to school-age children in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Specific case outcomes of LIAC legal representation and educational advocacy include:

- 162 students avoided, delayed or reduced the length of their suspensions.
- 62 school-age children overcame a barrier to enrollment in school.
- 3,582 cases were closed in which students with disabilities obtained an individualized educational program, received appropriate services consistent with special education law, and/or avoided an inappropriate special education classification.
- 2,200 cases were closed in which advice and counsel were obtained on an education matter.
- 2,676 cases were closed in which non-litigation advocacy services were obtained on an education matter.
- 3,804 cases were closed in which other benefits were obtained on an education matter.
- 506 cases were closed in which advice & counsel on a juvenile matter were obtained.

These numbers show the extent to which LIAC helped low-income families save money by preventing the need for them to hire private attorneys/advocates. In addition, by obtaining no cost evaluations and appropriate educational services, families were spared the need to pay out of pocket. During the reporting period, LIAC's advocacy and legal representation resulted in our clients receiving approximately eight hundred twenty-eight (828) educational evaluations which were paid for completely by their schools. Receiving these evaluations, at no cost, resulted in approximately one million two hundred and forty-two thousand dollars (\$1,242,000) in payments avoided by our clients. Obtaining appropriate educational services diverted families from the juvenile justice system and those associated costs. Providing free attorneys and advocates increased the families' access to justice in that it allowed them to enforce education and civil rights laws protecting their rights to appropriate educational services without discrimination.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

Example 1 (Education Law): A LIAC attorney was retained to represent a 6th grade student for a Superintendent’s Hearing and a Manifestation Determination Review. The student is classified as a student with a disability with a classification of Other Health Impairment based on a diagnosis of Developmental Coordination Disorder, a Learning Disability, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder. The student has a history of behaviors that include mumbling profanities and other inappropriate language and using inappropriate or threatening gestures and behaviors. He had a recent suspension for talking about guns in school.

At an anti-bullying assembly, conducted by a uniformed police officer, the student made comments to other students while sitting away from his paraprofessional 1:1 aide. The principal suspended the student for “making comments to other students in school about guns”. “I want to touch the police officer’s gun.” “My father has a gun at home.” and “My dad has a gun at home and I am going to bring it in and shoot you if you tell anyone.” were the statements supposedly made by the student. The suspension was for five days with a pending Superintendent’s Hearing, the results of which could have meant a long-term out of school suspension.

15,513

people
benefited
from

12,992

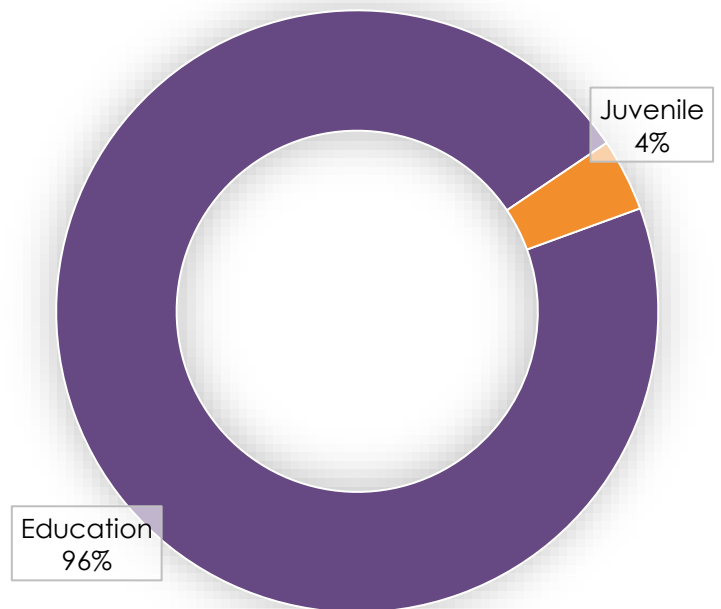
legal cases
closed

At the hearing, the LIAC attorney, through cross examination and direct examination, established there was insufficient evidence of the student making a threat to shoot anyone. The student was found “guilty” of the two other statements. A Manifestation Determination Review followed. Despite the LIAC attorney providing details from evaluations, an updated letter from the student’s psychiatrist, a district-created behavior plan, and clarifying that the student was not sitting with the paraprofessional, as dictated by the student’s IEP, the district found that the behaviors were not related to the disability and that the student’s IEP was properly implemented. The LIAC attorney filed an expedited Due Process Complaint

alleging the district violated the IDEA and New York State Regulations by failing to find a nexus. A resolution session was held and LIAC attorneys were able to negotiate an immediate return to school with an appropriately updated IEP.

Example 2 (Education/Juvenile Law): A Juvenile Delinquent student who was placed residentially through the court was preparing to return home from the placement. The district was supposed to provide Home Instruction for this student.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



It took the district over a month before they provided any education for this student, and in that time, they failed to submit application packets to alternative therapeutic day school programs for this student. When LIAC became involved in the case, the advocate contacted the district and the application packets were sent out by the end of the week. Since no Home Instruction was being provided, and the district failed to respond to the advocate’s communication, the advocate contacted the Superintendent to inform them of the situation and asked for it to be rectified. The next day, Home Instruction was approved and implemented.

The student’s applications were denied by several BOCES programs and the district’s plan was to keep the student on Home Instruction for the remainder of the year. The parent did not feel this was an appropriate education and was concerned that the child’s free and unstructured time, since there would be no school placement, would lead to further trouble, and the parent feared her child would be at risk for being placed residentially again.

The advocate, after discussing with one of LIAC’s attorneys, researched other alternative school options for the student. A viable alternative was found, the student was accepted into the program following the intake process, and has been attending the program consistently and is doing well academically and socially-emotionally. Further, the LIAC advocate also made sure the district would provide the hours of Home Instruction that the student was entitled to receive during the month they were home from their residential placement.

OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

All of our trainings includes Google Slide presentations and/or handouts with information on education law and advocacy techniques. This provides individuals, who may not have access to or an understanding of their rights, with important information regarding the education process and the tools necessary to ensure that their children receive the educational services for which they are entitled. This year, a total of one thousand four hundred and seventy-seven (1,477) individuals including: parents, school personnel, and human service agency providers received training and subsequent materials on education law and student rights. Topics presented included: Education on Education: Dissecting the IEP (Individualized Education Plan); The CSE and Suspension Process for Individuals with Disabilities; Benefits Advisement and Support Eligibility and Non-Medicaid Service Coordination: What Parents of Individuals with Disabilities Need to Know; The ABCs of IEPs; Know Your Rights- School Services/Special Education/School Suspensions; and What Every Matrimonial and Family Court Lawyer Should Know About Education Law.

Pro Se Assistance: LIAC provided pro se assistance to two thousand nine hundred and ninety-six (2,996) individuals via self-help materials accessed through our website, such as Committee on Special Education referral and evaluation request letters, DASA complaint forms, NYS Education Department complaint forms, residency and enrollment packets.

2,996

people
benefited
from

**Pro Se
Assistance**

55,725

people
benefited
from

**Community
Legal
Education**

22,898

people
benefited
from

**Web-Based
Assistance**

We distributed fifty-four thousand two hundred and forty eight (54,248) legal education materials and twenty-two thousand eight hundred ninety-eight people (22,898) accessed self-help materials through LIAC's online newsletter, website, and/or our social media pages.

Community Legal Education: LIAC provides Community Legal Education on an ongoing basis. Examples include:

- LIAC continues to educate and inform families on Transitioning to Adulthood, in both English and Spanish, since school districts are often out of compliance with the requirements of IDEA and the Part 200 Regulations. As a member of PTIC (Parent Training and Information Center), LIAC hosted a four-session series: REAL Transition Youth Mentoring.
- LIAC advocate presented Special Education Evaluations and Assessments: What Do All Those Numbers Mean? to several SEPTA (Special Education Parent Teacher Association) groups across Long Island. Presentations included information regarding the specific evaluations available to parents for their children through the Committee on Special Education, information about what the different evaluations measure, and a review of redacted evaluations with real numbers to help parents learn how to easily identify red flags and to understand what the scores and numbers actually mean.
- A LIAC advocate presented The CSE Process and Advocating for Your Child to several community groups and SEPTA (Special Education Parent Teacher Association) groups across Long Island. Presentations included information about the importance of family engagement in the educational process, how to navigate the different areas and processes of the educational world, and tips to empower parents and guardians in their own advocacy efforts. All participants were provided with a resource packet containing more specific information, helpful and user-friendly guides, and a list of additional community resources available.

TECHNOLOGY

Currently, all LIAC attorneys and advocates use Chromebooks, and utilize Google Workspace, to safely and remotely access emails, files, and information. Additionally, all staff members continue to use work-based iPhones, with unlimited data and a personal hotspot, to ease and ensure communication with clients and partnering agencies, regardless of their location, without compromising personal information.

LIAC continued to create and publish an electronic newsletter via email, social media, and our website. In an effort to enhance our newsletter, LIAC continued to utilize a Professional Canva account which allows for a more user-friendly and consistent formatting and we continued to use a bit.ly account which allowed areas of content in our newsletter to be safely and securely hyperlinked. By using these secure hyperlinks, our newsletters reached 99.5% of our intended recipients. The national average for non-profit newsletters shows that there is an average “open rate” of 28.59% and a “click rate” of 2.34%. In the last year, LIAC’s average “open rate” was 58.3%, more than twice the national average while our “click rate” was 5.8%, also more than twice the national average.

LIAC created a QR code that we embed on handouts, brochures, and will be incorporated into our business cards, that instantly connects people directly to our website so people can access all of our information electronically. Our website continues to run quite successfully and is updated regularly with new content and resources for parents and community members on various topics such as education law, suspension, diploma options, CPSE, bullying, and much more.

At the end of 2023, LIAC purchased a Constant Contacts account which we are integrating into how we distribute information to our network with the expectation that by mid 2024, it will be our sole mechanism for disseminating information. Additionally, LIAC also purchased a Zoho Analytics account which we will be using for case and data management to create a more uniform way for staff to capture, report, and analyze data and trends.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

LIAC used IOLA’s discretionary technology grant funds to improve our website and our fundraising capabilities. We hired a consultant to rebrand, design, and develop a new website for us (coming soon!) that will allow visitors a more seamless and user-friendly experience when using our website.

In order to revamp our website, we needed to first upgrade our website host. Through conversation with our website consultant, it was agreed we would purchase WordPress for our website hosting needs. All content from our existing website will be carried over to our new website, however, the formatting, layout, and structuring of the site and its pages will be updated.

LIAC also purchased GiveWP, a fundraising and donor management program, designed by WordPress, which will be integrated into our new website. This will allow us to better track the collection of our donations, establish and maintain a more comprehensive donor database, and will allow us to generate fundraising reports to help the agency better understand where our gaps exist and how we can move towards filling them.

Lastly, LIAC purchased accessiBe, to be integrated into our new website, to ensure our site is accessible for, and inclusive of, all individuals regardless of any disability they may have.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

Law Students from local law schools routinely work at LIAC as interns and externs. LIAC participates in Job Fairs at the local law schools to recruit new interns. In addition, LIAC has postings in the Career Centers at the law schools. Potential interns are interviewed by LIAC attorneys; once hired, law students assist LIAC in expanding our mission to reach greater numbers of clients. Interns are trained by LIAC attorneys in basic Education Law and have the opportunity to shadow LIAC attorneys. Under the supervision of LIAC attorneys, law students assist with research, client interviews, client follow-up, outreach, and trainings. Our law student interns also attend CSE meetings with advocates upon client approval. This year we were able to once again have law students in our office for internships.

LIAC also hires college student interns who assist our advocates with a variety of tasks, dependent upon staff needs. LIAC had a college student who interned this year to assist with general administrative tasks, social media development, and website maintenance.



4

law students volunteered **480** hours



4

other volunteers volunteered **100** hours

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

LIAC has continued a significant collaboration with the Suffolk County Probation Department this year by providing educational advocacy and attorney representation for at-risk and court involved youth. Through our collaboration with the AFY, PINS Diversion, JD, and Raise the Age programs, LIAC has been able to significantly impact the educational services for these youth. LIAC ensures that our students receive appropriate educational evaluations and appropriate educational services and programs. LIAC represents youth facing out of school suspensions and compels schools to provide appropriate interventions instead of excluding them from school.

This year we continued our Pre-PINS Diversion program in Suffolk County which allows LIAC to provide educational advocacy to students referred by schools to PINS Diversion before they are sent to PINS Diversion and assigned a Probation Officer. This program allows LIAC to advocate for the student's educational rights and hopefully divert the student from moving forward to PINS Diversion.

LIAC has continued to network with other organizations state-wide that align with the mission to address the disproportionality of exclusionary school discipline in an effort to affect change in public policy. This collaboration (Solutions Not Suspensions Coalition) remains focused on proposed legislation, bringing new allies to the table, and accessing those who may help shed light on the need for State level public policy response to the issue of disparities in school discipline. Meetings are convened to strategize the implications of existing regulatory language in light of proposed statutory changes but also to recognize the current altered education landscape and how education is delivered to students. Conversations center on meeting the existing needs, recognizing budget priorities and reframing existing needs within the bandwidth of the audience's priorities.

We have joined learning and advocacy communities with the Social Racial Equity Committee of Council of Parent Advocates and Attorneys as well as CLASP (Center for Law and Social Policy). These opportunities permit us to take a deeper dive into national trends as well as NYS practices and policies in the wake of recovery aid. In addition, we have continued to maintain and build our relationship and collaboration with NYS centered organizations, both those that have direct ties to our client population and those that focus on broader advocacy initiatives. In addition, our work with JD cases impacted the sentencing for youth which included the prevention of out-of-home placements and violations of probation. The Raise the Age legislation has led to an increase in the number of our JD clients this year.

Similarly, LIAC collaborates with the Nassau County Department of Social Services, the lead agency for the Nassau County PINS Diversion program. LIAC is able to divert cases from Family Court by advocating for appropriate educational services and by defending students accused of school misconduct at school discipline hearings. LIAC also collaborates with the Nassau County Office of Youth Services working with families of at-risk youth. LIAC continued its collaboration with SOBLLI and the Urban League to address the disparities in school discipline as it affects minority youth.

Similarly, our collaborations with MLK Center of Long Beach and Rockville Centre, EOC of Nassau County, Littig House, Choice for All, Hispanic Brotherhood of RVC, Hispanic Civic Association, Safe Center/Child Advocacy Center, Safe Haven/Homeless Youth, Long Island Progressives, Legal Aid Society, Make the Road New York, Erase Racism and STRONG/Uniondale have continued. LIAC has also been a member of the Suffolk County Access to Justice Committee of the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice. LIAC has been part of the planning and implementation of the Community Legal Help Project. Other ongoing collaborations this year include the Community Technical Assistance Center of New York, Families Together New York State, ACCES-VR, , EAC Dispute Resolution, Suffolk OMH System of Care, IDD subcommittee of the Suffolk County Division of Community Mental Hygiene Advisory Board, OPWDD, SEQA, NYSDRA, NYS DCDT and The Self Advocacy Association of NYS (Long Island Chapter), and the Nassau County OMH Interagency Committee.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 2,001,996

City and County	\$1,201,415
IOLA Funding	\$197,500
Federal Funding	\$92,330
Fundraising	\$10,000
State Funding	\$294,927

