

NEW YORK LEGAL ASSISTANCE GROUP

**2023 – 2024
Report**

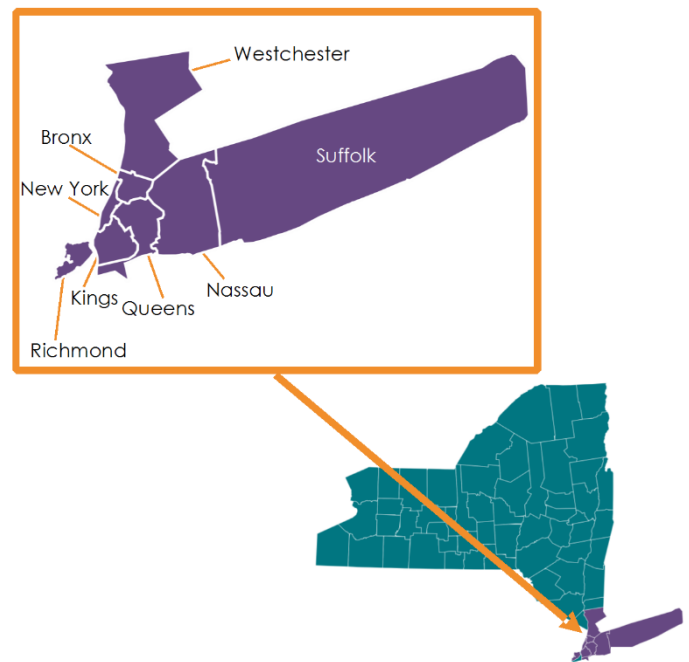
OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

From April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024, NYLAG’s paid staff increased to 377.75 FTE, including 239.7 attorneys and 85 FTE paralegals. We closed 31,668 cases for 78,455 people in New York City, Westchester, and Long Island. Some 6,244 individuals attended 146 community education workshops and trainings. Across New York State, 2,632,457 people benefited, or may benefit, from our successful impact litigation through active cases. There were 2,367,580 beneficiaries from closed impact cases and cases in active monitoring during the reporting period. NYLAG services had a demonstrable economic impact for clients.

Clients received back awards totaling \$18,683,070 and monthly benefits totaling \$413,687, including insurance payouts, public benefits, and child/spousal support. Clients avoided \$192,174,311 in lump sum settlements and obtained \$2,185,953 in ongoing monthly savings through reductions in consumer debt, mortgage payments, and other expenses. Our pro bono program recruited 1577 volunteer attorneys, paralegals, law students, and others, who donated 90,972 hours.

During the period, NYLAG launched and continued several initiatives to improve New Yorkers’ access to justice, including:

Recently Arrived Migrants: In response to the large number of migrants continuing to arrive in NY, NYLAG developed innovative programming to maximize the limited legal resources and provide community oriented, high quality legal assistance. The Pro Se Plus Project (PSP), in collaboration with community organizations, empowered migrants in their immigration process, handling over 580 cases and was recognized as a state-wide service model. (Please note, because this project goes beyond traditional pro se assistance, cases from this project are reported in Part II. Section B. 1.



Service Area: New York City Metropolitan Area

Population Served: General Low-Income Population

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:
 Total Staff: 377.75 Lawyers: 239.7
 Paralegals: 85.4 Others: 52.65

NYLAG developed cross-practice programming to address diverse legal needs, including partnerships with our Shelter Advocacy, Special Litigation, Employment Law, and LGBTQ Law Units.

Preventing Family Caregiver Abuse: In fall 2023, NYLAG launched a Preventing and Addressing Family Caregiver Abuse of Older Adults program to support victims of elder abuse on intersecting issues, including financial exploitation, identity theft, physical abuse, and other crimes. The program developed in partnership with social service organizations is designed to prevent abuse before it starts.

Legal Hand Call in Center serving East Harlem: In 2024 NYLAG, in partnership with Legal Hand, Inc., the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and Fordham University Law School launched the Legal Hand Call-in Center for East Harlem. It provides free legal assistance and referrals on housing, family, immigration, and more. Located in a Neighborhood Health Action Center in a low-income neighborhood, it aims to promote health equity by removing barriers to justice.

LGBTQ Law Unit: In January 2024, NYLAG's LGBTQ Law Project officially was institutionalized as a NYLAG Unit. The LGBTQ Law Project, launched in 2008, and the transition to unit underscores the need for comprehensive civil legal services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identified (LGBTQ) individuals experiencing poverty, regardless of age, immigration, or HIV status.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

Case Example #1, Immigration/Health: J, a queer woman from El Salvador, faced extreme violence and threats based on her sexual identity and relationship with her girlfriend. At 21 years old, after being kidnapped, beaten, and sexually assaulted, she miraculously survived and sought asylum in the U.S. When J was referred to NYLAG by Human Rights First, she was well beyond the one-year filing deadline for asylum. Ordinarily, this would mean that there were very limited avenues for her to prove eligibility for asylum.

Through our advocacy, we established to the court that she was a member of *Mendez Rojas v. Wolf* class, and therefore had an extended period of time to apply for asylum. Due to the extreme trauma J faced she battled PTSD, depression, and anxiety. We helped her receive emergency psychiatric care during the asylum process. J was granted asylum in May 2023, she

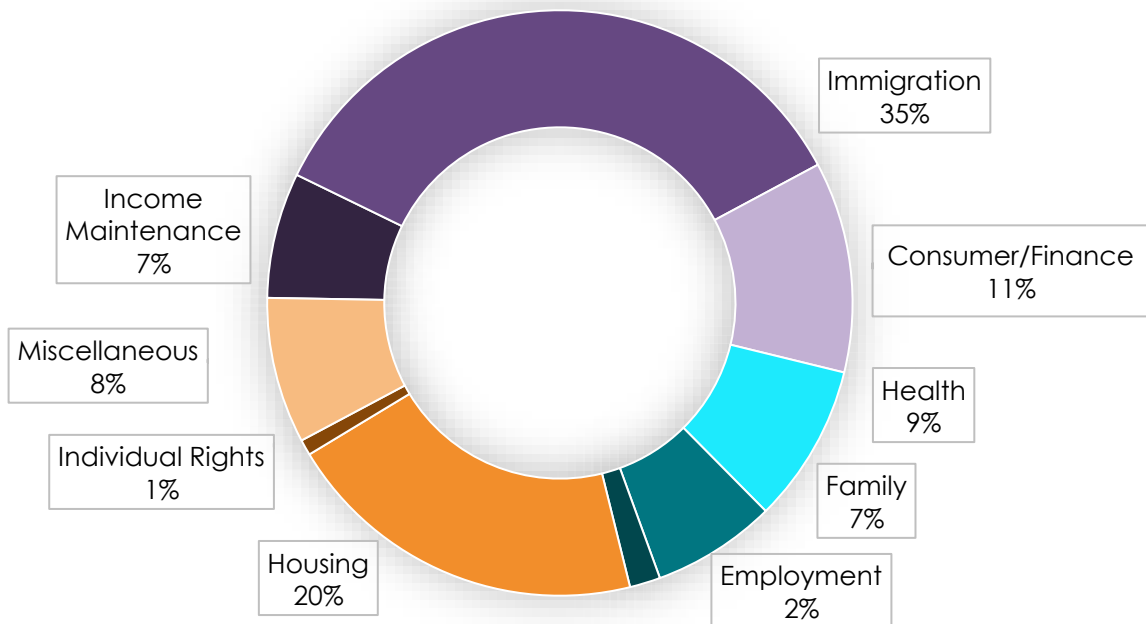
now resides safely in the U.S., she has employment authorization and access to Medicaid so she can get the ongoing mental health care she requires. We are currently working on her application for permanent residency.

Case Example #2 Veterans/Benefits/Housing: T, a 41-year-old veteran, faced numerous traumatic events during his service, leading to a mental health breakdown upon returning home. Despite his struggles, he was discouraged from seeking treatment. Without continued treatment and medication, T turned to alcohol and marijuana, which eventually caused his OTH Discharge.



With a OTH Discharge he was denied VA healthcare and disability benefits, he battled addiction and homelessness for over a decade until finding support from the Salvation Army. NYLAG helped him upgrade his discharge to Honorable and secure service-connected compensation, including a 90% rating for PTSD, headaches, tinnitus, and gastrointestinal issues, amounting to \$2,172/month. Although it's tragic he endured years without proper care, he now enjoys stable housing, employment, and plans to utilize VA education benefits to return to school.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

Community Education: We conducted virtual and in person community education workshops in partnership with health and human service organizations, offices of elected officials, government agencies, and schools, educating New Yorkers on their rights and the availability of free legal services. Our staff held 146 community trainings and clinics for over 6,244 community members and practitioners. EFLRP hosted 42 trainings and community presentations on a range of topics related to Medicaid, Long Term Care, Home Care, Medicare, the NY Independent Assessor program and more. The Immigrant Protection Unit hosted 35 trainings, presentations, and clinics, several of which were in partnership with the NYC Department of Homeless Services on giving newly arrived migrants the tools to be able to change their address with government agencies, as well as application assistance clinics for asylum seekers. The Public Benefits Unit's Elder Law Practice educated community members on Medicaid, Medicare, Planning for Long Term Care, Pooled Income Trusts, Advance Planning, and Guardianship Alternatives. The LGBTQ Unit hosted 12 trainings for 350 participants. Topics covered includes legal resources available for LGBTQI+ migrants, worker's rights, protections against discrimination, immigration law and health, name and gender changes, advance directives, and various other subjects.

Pro Se Assistance & Volunteer Resources: We offer pro se assistance and resources to 1,724 individuals this grant period. Specifically, NYLAG has operated the Pro Se Legal Clinic in

1,724

people
benefited
from

**Pro Se
Assistance**

21,764

people
benefited
from

**Community
Legal
Education**

381,712

people
benefited
from

**Web-Based
Assistance**

the SDNY since 2016, which serves on average 1,000 pro se litigants each year. The Clinic's services include providing counseling to potential litigants on filing cases in federal court, substantive and procedural legal advice to questions that may arise at any stage of litigation, assisting with motion practice, discovery, litigation strategy, preparation of depositions, and more.

Additionally, NYLAG is part of the Pro Se Plus Project (PSPP) collaborative which offers pro se assistance to asylum seekers. PSPP's website, hosted by one of our project partners, includes resources and training videos for migrants so they are empowered to advocate for themselves and to mobilize community supporters.

Our Consumer Protection Unit's Volunteer Lawyer for The Day (VLFD) Project continues to provide services for consumers in courthouses. This year, we have supplemented the initiative with a project dedicated to helping clients who are facing zombie debt judgements, which is an issue that is becoming increasingly present.

NYLAG continues to mediate divorces through our Mediation Project, taking referrals through the NYC Family Court Mediation Program and NYS Child Permanency Mediation program, and our intake line. The program collaborates with LSNYC as well as engages volunteers and students.

In addition to our primary legal services, we assist clients in filing complaints with the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP) regarding faulty process servers, contributing to potential crackdowns on such practices. We maintain a comprehensive list of faulty process servers and associated debt collector law firms who obtain default judgments based on lack of personal service.

Furthermore, our program benefits from two full-time pro bono scholars dedicated to our Volunteer Lawyer for a Day (VLFD) initiative, allowing us to take on extra clients and advocate effectively for those in need. Lastly, we successfully identify cases of faulty process service leading to default judgments, advocating for Traverse hearings, with successful outcomes often due to outdated filings or strategic communication with plaintiffs. The Veterans' Practice within the Public Benefits Unit also started an externship program with Columbia Law School.

IMPACT CASES

Impact Case Example #1, *Burks v. Gotham*:

Class Action filed in February 2020 against process serving agency Gotham Process Inc., process servers Carl Bouton and Bassem Elashrafi, and law firm Mullooly, Jeffrey, Rooney & Flynn, LLP. The case alleged that the process servers unlawfully served class members with debt collection lawsuits brought against them by fabricating the identities of relatives who did not exist and falsifying affidavits of service. A settlement was reached with process serving agency and debt collection law firm.

Milestones: In November 2023, the Court granted final approval to a class-wide settlement

Impact: As a result of the settlement, Defendants have provided \$1.35 million to a settlement fund to distribute to the class of over 3,200 New Yorkers. Additionally, the settlement provides significant injunctive relief, including that the process servers agreed to a permanent ban on serving process in all jurisdictions, a permanent cessation of collection by the debt collection law firm, and a likely permanent cession of collection on the underlying debt by anyone.

Impact Case Example #2, *Campos v. Kijakazi*:

Class action filed in September 2021 against the SSA. During COVID-19, SSA closed field offices, shutting down access to services clients need to maintain their SSI benefits. The case alleged that when the agency resumed assessing eligibility in September 2020, it unfairly penalized hundreds of thousands who relied on SSI to meet their basic needs for SSA's own lack of service during the early pandemic. NYLAG and co-counsel reached a settlement with the agency.

All Impact Cases

- *J.S.M. v. New York City Department of Education*
- *Cassidy v. Zucker (previously Guadagna)*
- *Forest v. New York (with Legal Aid Society)*
- *Jaquez v. Daniel Tietz et al.*
- *NYLAG v. United States Department of Homeland Security*
- *NYLAG v. United States Department of Education*
- *Dawson v. Student Loan Solutions*
- *NYLAG v. Social Security Administration*
- *Reynolds v. Giuliani (with Legal Aid Society, NCLEJ and Northern Manhattan Immigrant Coalition)*
- *Burks v. Gotham Process*
- *Campos et al. v. Kijakazi*
- *Josefina S. et. al. v. The City of New York*
- *Shakhnes v. Proud*
- *Soto v. Houslanger & Associates, et al. (formerly Dupres)*

Milestones: In November 2023, the Court granted final approval to a class-wide settlement.

Impact: As a result of the settlement, SSA will provide sweeping relief, including automatically returning funds to nearly a quarter million SSI recipients, and clarifying the standards by which 2 million more recipients can request that overpayments that arose during the pandemic be forgiven.

Impact Case Example #3, Josefina S. v. City of New York:

Class action filed in October 2017 against the City of NY. The

case alleged that the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) violated the rights of parents with known or suspected intellectual or developmental disabilities by failing to offer reasonable accommodations, failing to make its services accessible to parents with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and discriminating against these parents by assuming that they are not capable of parenting. NYLAG and co-counsel reached a settlement with the agency.

Milestones: In January 2024, the Court granted final approval to a class-wide settlement.

Impact: As a result of the settlement, ACS agreed to extensive changed practices relating to its interactions with parents who have intellectual or developmental disabilities, including, specifically, that it would tailor its services to the needs of parents with known or suspected intellectual or developmental disabilities so that they could benefit from ACS’s services in the same manner as non-disabled parents. ACS also agreed to train their staff on how to better handle cases involving parents with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Plaintiffs did not seek any money from the Defendant for the alleged discriminatory conduct.



TECHNOLOGY

NYLAG made several significant improvements in our use of technology this fiscal year. We completed the roll-out of NYLAG laptops to all staff members to ensure everyone has the

technology needed to securely, efficiently, and effectively work remotely and access IT support. Additionally, staff members who received laptops four years ago are now getting replacement devices. In response to staff and client feedback regarding accessibility, proficiency and ease of use, NYLAG transitioned our phone and video conferencing system from GoTo Meetings to Zoom. To enhance security, NYLAG replaced our firewall.

Additionally, NYLAG is in the early stages exploring a document management system with the goal of protecting client data and ensuring efficient workflow. We are also in the initial phases of exploring integrating ACL STARS (SHIP Tracking and Reporting System) with our Legal Server case management system. Currently, per contract requirements, staff spend significant amounts of time double entering data into both systems, which is inefficient and duplicative. Integration, if possible, will ease the administrative burden. Throughout the reporting period, NYLAG continued to mandate cyber security training for all staff.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

NYLAG utilized the IOLA technology grant to conduct an analysis of our document-related processes as well as transition our phone system to zoom. While NYLAG may have eventually completed these projects, we would not have in the past fiscal year without the IOLA Technology Grant.

After over three decades of service to the community and tremendous growth in the size of our organization, specifically over the last five years, and advances in technology and the transition to hybrid work, NYLAG has reached a point where we believe adapting new case-related documentation processes is a logical operational improvement and will better our staff and client experience. This initial assessment was designed to understand our current document volume and management and to recommend potential solutions that emphasize security, access, collaboration, and retention.

NYLAG also adopted Zoom as our new phone and video conferencing system (in addition to Microsoft Teams). Previously, NYLAG used GoTo Meetings which staff found inefficient, and clients expressed difficulty using. The transition to Zoom was to improve our client and staff experience. While the ongoing monthly cost of Zoom is the same as GoTo Meetings, there was an expense in transitioning the system.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

NYLAG's Pro Bono and Volunteer Unit leads our recruitment, training, and deployment of private pro bono attorneys, law students and other volunteers. This includes training pro bono attorneys, law students and other volunteers, ensuring they have appropriate and robust supervision, and ensuring case assignments available for pro bonos are robust and appropriate.

This fiscal year, NYLAG significantly increased our community and firm clinics and partner engagement. For example, the Immigrant Protection Unit held 47 clinics, the majority being clinics for pro se asylum application assistance or TPS assistance for new arrivals and Ukrainians. The Tenants' Rights Unit hosted 10 clinics, mainly for public housing tenants. The Public Benefits Unit hosted 12 clinics, largely in advanced planning which continues to be an issue area often requested by our community partners. Our Community Access Program hosted 28 clinics. Additionally, we had 18 pro bono placements at our Pro Se Clinic in the Southern District of New York and are actively working on expanding volunteer and pro bono engagement for this project. Our Veterans Practice continued the Columbia Law Veterans Rights Externship in Spring of 2023, based on the former project with Columbia Law. The Project allows seven law students to learn about the legal issues impacting military veterans while simultaneously developing valuable lawyering skills through direct assistance to our Veteran clients navigating eligibility and access to federal benefits. The Mediation Project continues to rely heavily on pro bono volunteers to serve as co-mediators and law students to assist with cases.

1,238attorneys volunteered **46,812** hours**175**law students volunteered **29,568** hours**143**other volunteers volunteered **14,275** hours

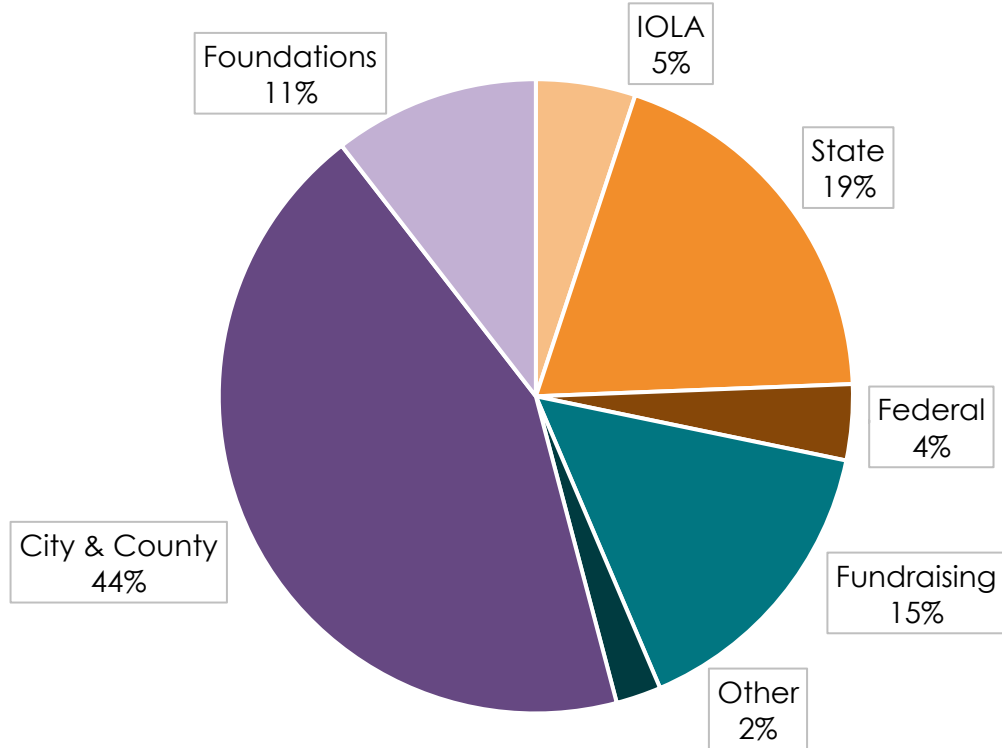
SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

NYLAG collaborates with hundreds of other legal services providers, private bar associations, law schools, and community-based organizations. Partnering with other organizations is central to our service-delivery model which emphasizes promoting access to justice through client-centered services. We maintain mutual referral relationships and partnerships with many organizations and participate in community events, trainings, and workshops. This includes partnerships with network members of UJA Federation of New York (of which NYLAG is a core partner).

This fiscal year, NYLAG's Immigrant Protection Unit continued to strengthen and expand partnerships, particularly within the Pro Se Plus Project, which includes UnLocal, Catholic Migration Services, Central American Legal Assistance, Venezuela Immigrant Aid, MASA and African Communities Together. We also forged new relationships with WIN (Women in Need) shelter, developing innovative programming to provide dedicated immigration services to recently arrived migrants in shelters, as well as Terra Firma, a medical-legal partnership. To help forge new partnerships and address the intersecting needs of our newest neighbors, NYLAG created a new attorney position that straddles between our Community Access Programs Unit and Public Benefits Unit, which supports community outreach and Know Your Rights workshops for newly arrived immigrants on issues including shelter, health insurance, and public benefits. The Immigrant Protection Unit also began working with JCH Bensonhurst on a new naturalization initiative for immigrant communities. Legal Health successfully renewed the contract with NYC Health + Hospitals, which expands our project, and remains the largest medical-legal partnership in the U.S. Legal Health and NYLAG's Veterans' Practice are partnering with Department of Veteran Affairs Medical Centers in the Bronx and Manhattan as well as the Borden Avenue Veterans Shelter to offer on-site veteran-specific legal clinics. The Shelter Advocacy Project within the Public Benefits Unit partners with City Relief on regular intake days at food and basic needs distribution locations. The Elder Law Practice and Domestic Violence Law Unit launched a new partnership to prevent family caregiver abuse with JASA, Met Council, the Weinberg Center, and the Weil Cornell Center for Elder Abuse Solutions. Our Mediation Project continues its partnership with Legal Services NYC and continued to be a part of the NYS Advisory Committee on ADR. Then Committee's work since 2018 culminated on February 13, 2024, with the Chief Administrative Judge of the State of New York enacting Part 160 of the Rules of the Chief Administrative Judge which, for the first time in the state, establishes a presumptive mediation system in most civil cases.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 41,525,243



IOLA Funding	\$ 2,108,332
City & County Funding	\$ 18,111,747
State Funding	\$ 8,017,457
Federal Funding	\$ 1,604,246
Foundations	\$ 4,355,959
Fundraising	\$ 6,372,51
Other Funding	\$ 954,986