

PART OF THE SOLUTION

**2023 – 2024
Report**

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

We at Part of the Solution (POTS) serve low-income residents of the Bronx, the county with the highest eviction rate and ranked as the least healthy county in New York State. During the grant year, POTS provided legal services to 601 households, consisting of 1571 individuals, and obtained \$3,978,838.66 in back awards and settlements and an additional \$27,931.62 in monthly benefits for our clients. POTS also saved clients \$7,249 in awards and settlements avoided.

Housing: POTS’ legal team focuses on helping Bronx residents at risk of losing their homes and prevented a total of 278 evictions in the grant year, including 210 evictions from private housing, 64 from subsidized housing, and 4 from public housing.

Highlights of our other housing-related legal outcomes include:

- Obtained \$1,672,755.48 in contributions to pay rent arrears, including \$677,120.30 from private charities; \$570,116.02 in FHEPS funds; and \$385,714.33 in NYS ERAP funds;
- Obtained back awards and settlements for housing benefits valued at \$23,424.23;
- Helped housing clients avoid \$7,249. in judgments or settlements;
- Delayed eviction and obtained additional time to find alternative housing for 3 households; and
- Obtained housing, improved housing conditions or otherwise enforced rights to decent habitable housing for 8 households.

Income Maintenance: POTS achieved the following income maintenance outcomes:

- Overcame the denial of emergency assistance for 28 households, consisting of 62 individuals;



Service Area: The Bronx
Population Served: General Low-Income Population
Staffing Full Time Equivalents:
 Total Staff: 8 Lawyers: 4
 Paralegals: 4

- Obtained, preserved, or increased food stamps eligibility for 5 households, consisting of 12 individuals; and
- Obtained back awards and settlements for “Other federal benefits” (other than social security, SSI and SSDI) valued at \$2,273,964.11 and an additional \$3,251.10 in monthly federal benefits.

Increased Access to Justice / Improvements in the Administration of Justice: We held three Know-Your-Rights presentations at which 203 community members attended. All three presentations focused on matters of interest to low-income tenants:

- Together with Housing Court Answers, POTS informed attendees on how to access POTS’ legal clinic services and related services.
- In partnership with the NYC Commission on Human Rights, POTS provided community education on Your Rights When a Landlord Discriminates Based on Source of Income.
- POTS provided community education on How to Apply for Emergency Rental Assistance.

Improvements in Capacity to Deliver Services: We added another legal advocate to the legal team. We anticipate that this will increase the team’s capacity.

Effective 1/1/2024, we obtained a significant increase in private funds available to help pay rent arrears through a foundation grant. These funds will be used to issue commitment letters, help pay rental arrears and preserve housing for low-income tenants. This grant increase will enable POTS to save more tenants from eviction.

We continue to upgrade our technology. POTS’ Salesforce CRM has been customized to allow the legal team to track the availability of private grant money to pay rent arrears. Until this upgrade, POTS had relied on spreadsheets to track the funds, which had been time-consuming and inefficient.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

Housing, Case Example #1: EM came to POTS' legal clinic intake in May 2023 requesting help with an ongoing eviction proceeding. At that time, she owed over \$36,000 in rent arrears and was at imminent risk of eviction if the arrears were not paid.

EM incurred the arrears when she lost her job during the pandemic and her husband left the marital home. POTS initially tried to resolve the matter by offering a commitment of client emergency funds and requesting that HRA fund the remaining arrears. When HRA declined, POTS provided full legal representation to the client. POTS successfully moved to vacate the judgment, warrant, and prior stipulations, as the tenant had waived pandemic-era defenses related to her financial hardship during the COVID-pandemic. This reduced the total amount of arrears by approximately \$7300. POTS then advocated with other organizations for contributions to pay the reduced arrears.

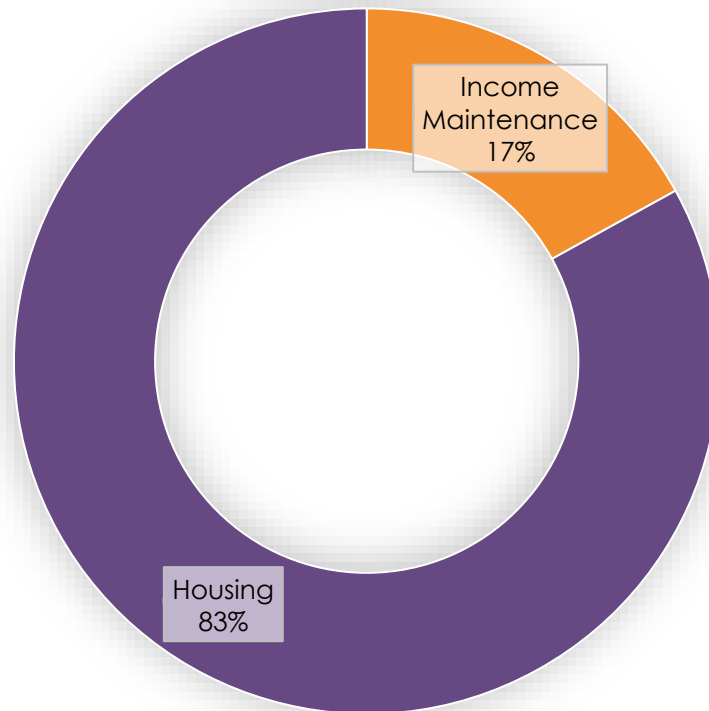
POTS succeeded and obtained a combination of charity commitments totaling \$4157.08 (including \$1157.08 from POTS and \$3000 from external private organizations) and an HRA commitment and approval to pay the remaining arrears. POTS' work allowed the client to avoid eviction and remain stably housed.



Housing, Case Example #2: AML came to POTS in June 2023 because her household was in rent arrears and did not have the income needed to pay the monthly rent of \$1914 for her 2-bedroom rent stabilized apartment.

Our office represented the client in a nonpayment proceeding in Bronx housing court and with 2 fair hearings. The first hearing concerned HRA's failure to process a FHEPS application to resolve rent arrears. That hearing was not successful, and POTS continued to follow up with HRA to secure FHEPS for this client.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



The second fair hearing was to challenge a case closing that was imposed in November 2023 for allegedly failing to comply with a required recertification. HRA declined to defend the case closing and the cash assistance case remained open with no lost benefits, as HRA determined it would not take the threatened action to close the benefits case once the fair hearing was requested.

POTS provided several months of court representation and agency advocacy and FHEPS approved the application March 2024. The client received full payment of her rent arrears (by that time the arrears were \$26,933.39) and a monthly rent supplement of \$1567.33 to cover the full ongoing monthly rent, together with the cash assistance shelter allowance grant. The landlord also waived a portion of the arrears (\$2895.73), as the arrears climbed above \$20,000 during the course of the proceeding. POTS was able to provide a grant from private funds to pay utility arrears and ensure the family's emergency needs were met.

OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

Community Legal Education: POTS provides community legal education in both English and Spanish to inform community members of their legal rights, particularly their housing rights, and the availability of POTS to provide these targeted legal services. POTS collaborates with other CBOs and city agencies when conducting its community legal education in order to expand its reach into the community.

Pro Se Assistance: POTS is unable to provide full legal representation to meet the demand. If the potential client is unable to connect with another provider, POTS provides advice on how to proceed pro se. Also, the legal team helped clients complete forms to file HP cases against their landlords on a pro se basis to get their housing violations fixed, when housing repairs was not part of the case for which POTS is providing direct representation.

Similarly POTS also provides advice to clients who proceed on a pro se basis in administrative hearings to protect their access to public benefits, frequently helping them apply for hearings without agreeing to be the client's representative at the hearing.

Further this pro se advice clears up significant confusion clients are experiencing. For example, many clients think predicate notices are eviction notices and they think they have to vacate units, not understanding that many more steps are involved and they have more time to try to resolve issues like rent arrears.

POTS does not track the number of pro se filings on which it provided assistance or their outcomes. Generally, these cases are given the outcome "advice and counsel."

425

people
benefited from
**Pro Se
Assistance**

203

people
benefited from
**Community
Legal
Education**

TECHNOLOGY

POTS has used technology to improve the legal team's screening and intake process. Persons seeking legal assistance must complete an online form accessible by a QR code. POTS uses this information to identify those persons whom POTS can serve with its limited resources. More details regarding this screening process are provided above in the discussion regarding intake. POTS' Salesforce CRM was modified to track the availability of grant funds available to help clients. The legal team can now track through Salesforce the private grant funds it has available to help pay client rent arrears. This is more efficient than the Excel spreadsheets that the team previously used.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

We at POTS used the \$10,000 technology infrastructure funds to pay for a portion of consulting services used to upgrade our customized Salesforce software across all programs. With respect to the legal team, the upgrade accomplished the following:

- It integrated grants into the same system as its client information and eliminated the need for multiple Excel spreadsheets to track grant funds.
- It facilitates the legal team's communication with the development and finance departments. Development inputs the grant information in Salesforce. Finance approves that the funds have been received and are available for the legal team.
- Legal, finance, and development teams can track available funds more efficiently, thus freeing up valuable time for each to continue assisting the community.
- The upgrade enables legal staff to more accurately track the work they have done with clients and enhances monitoring of files for supervision and training purposes.
- The upgrade improved the organization of past and current data and will enhance retrieval of older data.

The larger project of which the above improvements were a part included the building of custom apps to improve tracking of work by all of POTS' programs. It helped clean up data across the programs and helped improve the quality of data used in POTS' Stability Index. The Stability Index establishes standards to determine clients' progress toward stability in five areas: housing, financial, day-to-day needs, health and education.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

POTS successfully recruited two law school interns last summer. Both provided critical legal research and support for approximately nine weeks.

POTS also had two college interns who provided support last summer for approximately 8 weeks and one high school student who provided support for about 2 weeks last summer.

2

law students volunteered **681** hours

3

other volunteers volunteered **477** hours

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

POTS collaborates with legal services organizations and other CBOs serving low-income Bronx residents. POTS works with New York Legal Assistance Group to receive guidance on cases that included social security benefits matters, disability hearings, termination cases, and budgeting advocacy. POTS also receive and provide client referrals from the Urban Justice Center, the Legal Aid Society, Bronx Defenders, Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, Mobilization for Justice and Bronx Legal Services. These organizations were able to provide POTS clients with specific services above the organization's current capacity, including referrals to receive emergency funding, legal guidance on immigration matters, and connections to HomeBase providers.

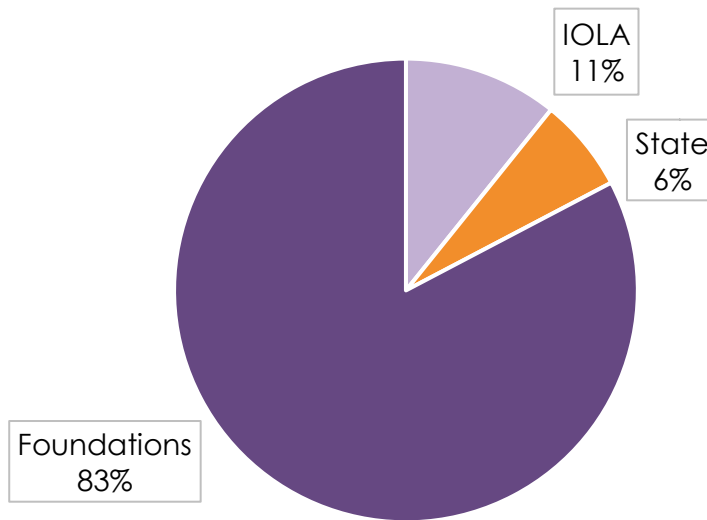
POTS' Legal Team also collaborated with Coalition for the Homeless, Community Service Society, The Bridge Fund, Neighborhood Association for Inter-Cultural Affairs, the Gerstner Family Foundation, Catholic Charities, HELP USA, and BronxWorks on several nonpayment housing cases. POTS was able to advocate for clients and work with the organizations to obtain approvals of grant requests to eliminate rental arrears.

The Legal Team also participates in meetings with Bronx Solidarity, a collection of organizations for tenant attorneys and advocates who work together to advocate for improvements in housing court practice. POTS’ Supervising Attorney serves on Bronx Solidarity’s Steering Committee. The Supervising Attorney attends regular meetings with HRA and Housing and Homelessness Prevention advocates regarding improving HRA operations.

Lastly, POTS’ Supervising Legal Advocate participates in NYC Emergency Rent Coalition, a collection of CBOs providing emergency financial assistance to clients, sharing information, and streamlining referrals and coordination between partner organizations. POTS’ Legal Team utilizes this network as a source of information about law and policy changes, grants, outreach needs, and updates about other legal service providers.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 1,064,189



IOLA Funding	\$ 114,609
State Funding	\$ 69,580
Foundations	\$ 880,000