

PRO BONO NET

2023 – 2024 Report

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

Pro Bono Net’s IOLA-funded programs leverage technology to ensure access to a full continuum of legal options for low-income and vulnerable individuals in New York State, ranging from early intervention tools and self-advocacy support to limited scope pro bono and full representation. During this reporting period, our programs reached a total of 1,107,969 individuals through pro se assistance, referral information, online outreach, and community legal education. We also recruited and trained 142 new pro bono volunteers to help low-income New Yorkers access help for pressing legal needs and equipped 329 organizations with tools and resources to enhance services for low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers.

During this grant period, LawHelpNY’s legal information resources were accessed over half a million times, and new Guides on navigating debt collection, housing repairs, child custody, tenant protections, and help for crime victims garnered over 30,000 views. We worked on at least 180 resources during this period, including developing 29 new resources. Organizational listings in our Legal Help Directory were viewed over 168,000 times. LawHelp Interactive (LHI), our free online forms program, created 9,317 free court document packages for victims of domestic violence, and an additional 127,681 free document packages for self-represented litigants navigating other civil legal issues. We recruited and trained 142 volunteers from over 30 law schools for our LiveHelp program. They provided information and attorney referral assistance to an average of 700 individuals a month, totaling 2,080 pro bono hours.

The top accessed resource on our Crime Victims Legal Help website was the Victim Compensation Guide with almost 25,000 views, while the Victim Compensation Claim Navigator, a companion tool, was used over 1,100 times. Justicia Lab, our



Service Area: New York State

Population Served: General Low-Income Population

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:

Total Staff: 24 Lawyers: 5

Paralegals: 9 Others: 10

immigrant justice initiative, provided referrals to 27,055 New Yorkers across our Immigration LawHelp, Citizenshipworks and Immi platforms, and conducted trainings across New York State on the use of Citizenshipworks, our award-winning platform for naturalization. We also expanded use of ¡Reclamo!, our digital tool to combat wage theft, which has helped workers file over \$1.6M in wage theft claims with the NYS Department of Labor since launching in October 2022.

329

legal aid and community groups
received technical and other
support services

OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

LawHelpNY: Through LawHelpNY, we provide individuals with know-your-rights resources, self-help tools, court information, and attorney referral information to New Yorkers statewide who may not be able to access or afford an attorney. We offer navigational assistance to an average of 700 site visitors a month through our LiveHelp program. LiveHelp supervises law student volunteers, who staff the online chat service and connect users to helpful resources and legal referrals. LawHelpNY also provides rapid access to resources for intake workers, hotline staff, and community organizations. LawHelpNY's referral directory is embedded or linked on other key websites that individuals visit for legal help, including crimevictimshelpny.org, CourtHelp, the New York State Bar Association, New York City Bar Association, and numerous legal aid and community partner websites.

LawHelp Interactive: Our LawHelp Interactive (LHI) program allows people living on limited means without access to a lawyer to prepare their own legal forms online for free through online, plain language, guided interviews. LHI is also integrated with and used daily by staff providing court-based and civil legal aid services for self-represented litigants throughout the state. LHI's mobile-friendly, guided legal forms help to reduce costs to people already facing economic precarity, including time off work, transportation to and from court, and the stress of dealing with an issue putting one's home, family, or livelihood at stake. As a user of the LHI-powered child support modification form said, "VERY Helpful packet and guide. Will probably

save \$100's if not a couple \$1,000. THANK YOU!" Another shared, "Thanks for making these forms available for free. They are great help to low-income individuals and family." During this period, the Family Offense Petition program, a collaboration between LHI, the New York Courts, and DV agencies across the state, was used to complete more than 9,300 forms for DV survivors. Across all other issue areas, LHI completed more than 127,681 legal document packages, providing an essential legal lifeline for low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers navigating court on their own.

Pro Se Assistance: During this reporting period, our Family Offense Petition Program, Remote Legal Connect, and LiveHelp programs provided pro se assistance to 16,835 people. This encompassed help from a trained advocate or volunteer in accessing and preparing court forms, information on how to file forms, procedural information, and other guidance on self-representation for individuals navigating consumer, housing, family, and other civil justice proceedings on their own.

Citizenshipworks: Our award-winning Citizenshipworks program, an online naturalization platform that offers free and comprehensive support to immigrants at all stages of the citizenship process in New York, enrolled 1,508 new users to access help with the naturalization process and naturalization forms. Additionally, Citizenshipworks assisted 934 individuals in preparing naturalization forms through clinics and workshops, and generated more than 700 free, complete naturalization (N-400) applications for immigrant New Yorkers. Through a partnership with the York State Office of New Americans (ONA) we offer a New York State

19,277

people
benefited
from

**Pro Se
Assistance**

6,834

people
benefited
from

**Community
Legal
Education**

870,375

people
benefited
from

**Web-Based
Assistance**

Citizenship Portal through which New Yorkers can access free and trustworthy assistance with their citizenship application online and from the comfort of their home, and optionally enroll with our partner GMHC for a free, online legal consult.

Legal Risk Detector: In addition, we continue to partner with JASA and the Center for Elder Law & Justice (CELJ) to support usage of the Legal Risk Detector in New York, a legal issue-spotting and referral tool designed for social workers and other professionals working with older Americans. The Risk Detector facilitated 1,027 screenings during this reporting period, immediately connecting older New Yorkers to legal help for any issues identified that may impact their economic security and well-being. The Legal Risk Detector expands preventative legal assistance to homebound and other elderly populations who are difficult to reach through traditional legal services and has served as a model for similar programs in other states.

Community Legal Education: During this period, Pro Bono Net also reached 6,834 individuals with community legal education through LawHelpNY and Justicia Lab. Our community legal education strategies included presentations, distribution of educational brochures and other materials, and delivering legal education resources through email communications and blog posts.

TECHNOLOGY

After launching the redesigned LawHelpNY.org using Drupal, an open-source software and content management system, Pro Bono Net continued its commitment to ongoing development and enhancement of the site. We onboarded a new Drupal firm to develop and maintain the site, archived, updated, and added new substantive and referral content, built a landing page to house the shuttered Tenant Help NY content and redirected traffic from the old site, improved user safety by adding a Quick Exit button that enables vulnerable visitors to quickly switch to another site when someone enters the room, improved site security, enhanced analytics for data gathering, implemented additional flexibility for improved user experience, streamlined the backend of organizational profiles, implemented enhanced dashboard functionality for administrators of the site to more quickly and intuitively organize and retrieve information, updated notifications with more user-friendly language, and more. Last year, we also joined an LSC TIG-funded project with Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York, Inc. and five other New York State legal aid programs to develop a coordinated online intake Portal for eviction defense services.

We have also made significant strides in building our organizational capacity to responsibly and effectively leverage generative AI (GenAI) to advance our access to justice mission. In November 2023, in collaboration with Google.org, our JusticiaLab program brought together nine leading immigration advocacy organizations and 10+ Googlers for a two-day sprint at Google's New York City offices focused on leveraging AI to reduce duplication, combat misinformation, and ensuring public access to accurate and up-to-date immigrant rights information. We are now working on outgrowths of this sprint, propelled by our recent acceptance to Google.org's first Generative AI Accelerator for organizations seeking to deploy AI solutions to address some of society's greatest challenges. We look forward to sharing our learning with the New York civil justice community as this initiative progresses.

During this reporting year, Pro Bono Net secured a cybersecurity grant from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services Securing Communities Against Hate Crimes (SCAHC) program, focused on enhancing the cybersecurity of not-for-profits at risk of hate crimes because of their mission, services, ideology, or beliefs. Work on this project is underway and will support ongoing hardening of our cloud-based technology infrastructure in line with evolving cyber threats.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

Pro Bono Net applied our supplemental 2023 IOLA Technology Grant funds towards renewing our cybersecurity insurance, a key component of our technology resilience in the face of evolving cyber threats. Our organization works with the most vulnerable in New York State, including victims of domestic violence, the elderly, exploited workers, undocumented immigrants, disabled individuals, and victims of crime. We also operate key web-based statewide systems that New York State agencies, personnel and partners rely on to conduct daily services assisting these populations, including at New York State court self-help centers, domestic violence shelters, hospitals, libraries, and Office of New American Opportunity Centers. While we have succeeded in protecting our users and their data from harm, we recognize that new threats arise daily to individuals and state government institutions, and that our ability to continue to safeguard our users must keep pace with these shifting risks. Supplemental IOLA funding helped offset cybersecurity insurance costs and allowed us to invest other funds in ongoing security profile enhancements, a strategic priority for our organization and the communities we serve.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

We recruit, train and deploy pro bono attorneys and non-attorney volunteers in several ways. The largest pro bono initiative we directly manage is LiveHelp, our statewide legal information and referral-finding online chat service. During this period, we recruited and trained 142 volunteers to assist an average of 700 individuals a month - more than 7,000 people total, a total of 2,080 pro bono hours. We provide extensive training to LiveHelp volunteers (primarily law students and law graduates) including on navigating and finding information on LawHelpNY, CourtHelp, the Crime Victims Legal Help Network, as well as the difference between legal information and legal advice.

Additionally, volunteers participate in a live online training with the Program Manager on cultural competency and unconscious bias, and webinars on the most common legal issues facing visitors to LawHelpNY. The Program Manager sends regular feedback to LiveHelp Operators via email, incorporating program updates, tips on FAQs and feedback on the chats that week. During this period, our LiveHelp program also implemented changes to improve recruitment and training of volunteers, including hiring a Volunteer Coordinator to support LiveHelp's law student and attorney volunteers. We also engaged a LiveHelp consultant to review current volunteer training and suggest updates, and developed a social media strategy to spread awareness about LiveHelp to potential volunteers.

Probono.net/ny offers tools that support and facilitate the work of pro bono volunteers, including a guide to volunteer opportunities, a calendar of local training events, and tools for legal services providers to communicate with their volunteers. Pro Bono Net's staff also served as trainers in webinars and events for pro bono advocates focusing on pressing civil justice issues. Examples of trainings we developed include Climate Disaster Recovery and Community Resilience: The Role of Legal Professionals, a November 2023 on-demand training co-produced with PLI, and trainings delivered through our Immigration Advocates Network Advocate Resource Center. While open to national audiences, these trainings have strong pro bono attendance from New York-based law firms and corporations.

142

law students volunteered **2,080** hours

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

Advisory Committee: LawHelpNY's most significant collaboration is with our Advisory Committee, composed of the New York State Bar Association and 12 leading nonprofit legal aid providers across the state that we engage for advice, feedback, and program improvement. We rely on the wide-ranging staff expertise at our partner organizations to help us share accurate and understandable legal information. LawHelpNY hosted a series of Advisory Committee and individual partner meetings to provide updates, seek guidance, and encourage collaboration to share and review legal content. This year we recruited partners to review 25 new plain language articles; and analyze our site for content gaps. Their contribution to our work is critical, but their time and capacity to review existing content is limited. Some partner staff and leadership have expressed interest in a more coordinated strategy to update and share content among partner organizations. This could help LawHelpNY maintain and update the existing content, with less emphasis on creating new content. Through LawHelpNY, our Legal Director is active in a number of other significant collaborations including a project with five legal service organizations outside of New York City to build and coordinate an eviction triage program and resource center. Our Legal Director also participates in New York Legal Services Coalition meetings and activities to support good policy and funding for access to justice initiatives in the state, and we are part of an AmeriCorps VISTA cohort spearheaded by Fordham's Feerick Center for Social Justice.

The Crime Victims Legal Network: The Crime Victims Legal Network (CVLN) is developed and maintained in collaboration with Empire Justice Center and the Center for Human Services Research at the University at Albany. Advisory Committee members include the Center for Elder Law & Justice, Neighborhood Legal Services, In Your Own Voices, Legal Assistance of Western New York, Schuyler County District Attorney's Office, The Legal Project, NYS Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts, and Disability Rights New York. All of the more than 50 New York State Office of Victims Services-funded organizations are CVLN members.

Law Schools: Our LiveHelp program collaborates with more than 30 law schools to recruit, train and support law student volunteers participating in our program. LiveHelp connects with law school faculty to integrate LiveHelp into their pro bono programs and complement the law students' legal education. LiveHelp also provides law schools with volunteer data reports upon request.

New York Courts: Our key collaborator for LawHelp Interactive (LHI) continues to be the New York Courts, which develop and maintain the court DIY forms available through LHI. In

In addition, we work with the New York Courts to train and support a statewide network of DV shelters and nonprofits that use the Family Offense Petition. This network assisted more than 9,000 survivors with completing and remotely filing orders of protection during this grant period, an essential step towards safety and justice.

New York State Office of New Americans: During the grant period, Justicia Labs partnered with the New York State Office of New Americans to offer a New York State Citizenship Portal to bring naturalization services directly to New Yorkers. In addition, we worked closely with Make the Road on development and training for ¡Reclamo!, our digital tool to combat wage theft.

Additional Collaborations: In 2023, our Pro Bono Initiatives team supported our probono.net/ny practice area hosts, including Legal Services NYC, the City Bar Justice Center, Legal Aid Society, and CLARO, among others, in offering online practice resources to volunteers and advocates. Our Remote Legal Connect collaborators included Family Legal Care, Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York, and Hofstra University School of Law. In the elder justice arena, we partner with the Center for Elder Law & Justice and JASA to deliver Risk Detector-powered legal screenings for isolated older adults in Queens and the greater Buffalo area.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 2,922,359

IOLA Funding	\$ 1,043,850
State Funding	\$ 424,430
Federal Funding	\$ 127,863
Foundations	\$ 394,000
Fundraising	\$ 206,000
Other Funding	\$ 726,216

