

# **RURAL LAW CENTER**

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**2023 – 2024  
Report**

# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The Rural Law Center’s impact on equal justice for the low-income rural residents of New York continued to grow. There was an 13% increase in people benefited from our prior reporting year. This increase reflects the number of residents who otherwise would not have access to civil legal services. RLC provided legal services and advocacy to low-income individuals and families through life changes like divorce, obtaining protection from domestic violence, resolving child custody issues, obtaining child support for parents, navigating through bankruptcy, securing safe and affordable housing, and accessing benefits. This annual report outlines the financial outcomes of cases handled by RLC, including lump sum awards to clients and costs avoided and saved by clients. One case may have one or more outcomes, and not every case resulted in a financial award.

In this reporting period, approximately 41,532 individuals were served through the RLC’s initiatives (people benefited through legal civil services closed cases 5,094; community legal education 4,761; pro se assistance 685; website assistance 29,908; and mediation services 1,084). We were able to resolve and closed 2,214 cases benefitting 5,094 low-income individuals and families residing in the 44 rural counties of New York State. Our total services resulted in approximately \$964,196 in dollar benefits gained to our clients through lump sum awards and settlements, as well as \$1,160,318 in dollar savings to clients. Further, we estimate a total of \$1,660,500 in client savings of legal fees for the services RLC provided.

The increase of people benefited this reporting year included clients with matters that required assistance with Housing Stability: Preventing homelessness by fighting wrongful evictions and foreclosures, ensuring that uninhabitable



**Service Area:** New York State

**Population Served:** General Low-Income Population

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**  
 Total Staff: 16.5    Lawyers: 6  
 Paralegals: 5        Others: 5.5

conditions received necessary repairs, and preserving subsidy for Section 8 voucher holders. Economic Stability: Removing barriers to employment, assisting clients with overwhelming consumer debt, and assistance with applying for the necessary benefits to fulfill needs such as food, shelter, medical care and other services to attain self-sufficiency. Supporting Families: Partnering with STOP Domestic Violence in several rural communities to assist survivors of domestic violence with child custody, visitation, support, divorce and obtaining protection and permanent residency if necessary.

We continue to enhance our remote and hybrid work with our clients and communities. This reporting period we reached 4,761 low-income rural residents through community legal education, consisting of rural residents experiencing higher housing costs and record high increases on food and basic supplies. Our outcome was achieved through community presentations and providing legal information to individuals and communities.

## DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

### Example One: Housing (Americans with Disabilities Act)

A disabled tenant living in a rural community was a victim of retaliatory eviction. After tenant's best efforts to resolve the issue of an unsafe and inaccessible handicap ramp with the landlord, the tenant requested the help of his local codes enforcement office and the NY Division of Human Rights.

The client was a double amputee who moved into the rental property partly because it was already equipped with a handicap ramp. However, over a period of time the ramp required some necessary repairs that the landlord refused to remedy. Upon completion of an inspection, the local code enforcement officer issued a Remedy to Order for several safety concerns and deemed the handicap ramp unsafe and nonfunctional. Upon receipt of the Order to Remedy, the landlord began an eviction proceeding against the tenant.

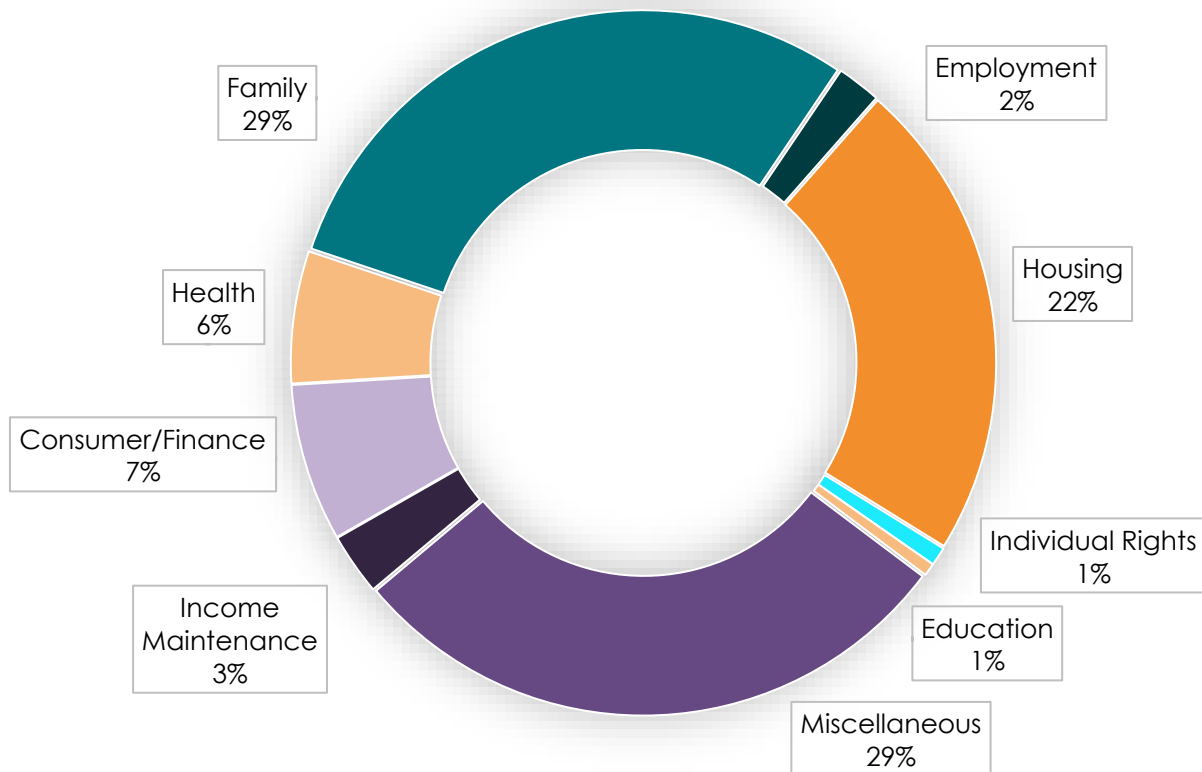
Once the tenant sought our assistance, our staff attorney prepared an Answer and negotiated with the landlord to allow additional sufficient time for the client to find alternate housing. We advocated with many local organizations and secured housing that was handicap accessible and would also accept the client's section 8 housing voucher. This allowed the client to relocate to a home he could safely access and afford. It was the clients wish to find alternate housing.

### Example Two: Income Maintenance

A low-income client came to us seeking assistance with an income execution for a default judgment that was entered in 2016 in the amount of \$9,806.27. The client was not aware of said judgment and had never been served with any documents regarding the judgment. Upon researching the details of the Judgment, our staff attorney discovered that there was no Affidavit of Service on file. We prepared and filed a Motion to Dismiss with supporting Affidavit on behalf of the client, which resulted in the judgment being dismissed. We negotiated a settlement amount of 40% of the original judgment, along with a payment arrangement that the client could afford.



## CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



## OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

RLC has provided support with other legal related services through our customized initiatives. We provided legal related support to older adults and veterans. Our goal is to educate about housing, consumer debt, health care proxies, wills and family issues. Strategies include hosting workshops (including virtual), establishing a referral system with rural Offices for the Aging, and providing legal information on the importance of estate planning and elder law. The total number of people served in this reporting period is 1,117.

**Rural Housing Initiative:** RLC also has a rural housing initiative. Our target population is rural, low-income tenants, homeowners (including mobile homes), and farm producers. Strategies in this program include providing legal information on home ownership, land contracts, mobile home law and landlord-tenant matters, and assisting agricultural producers facing debt and foreclosure on family farms. The total number of people served in this period is 992.

**Kinship Outreach Program:** We also have a kinship outreach program. The target population includes grandparents or relatives seeking custody in family court preventing foster care placements. Our goal is to increase knowledge and access to the complex process in rural county family courts. Strategies include direct legal assistance for non-parents seeking custody, publishing and distributing material specific to this unique custody process, and providing workshops for child protective caseworkers, childcare advocates, and potential kinship and/or foster care providers. The total number of people served in this reporting period is 803.

685

people  
benefited  
from

**Pro Se  
Assistance**

4,761

people  
benefited  
from

**Community  
Legal  
Education**

29,908

people  
benefited  
from

**Web-Based  
Assistance**

**Mediation Program:** RLC has a long-standing mediation program. Our target population includes individuals, schools, community organizations, probation, and businesses who can employ these techniques in their individual settings. Beyond individual casework, our three county mediation program conducts significant outreach and community training. We continue to recruit and train new volunteers, who then go through our apprenticeship program.

This reporting period, we have provided in person services in court and with individuals, along with virtual services. Our goal is to continue to provide knowledge about alternate methods to resolve disputes, which in turn alleviates strain on the court system. Strategies include offering workshops to community groups, schools and human service agencies introducing the basic theory and skills for ADR. The total number of people served in this reporting period is 1,084.

**Empowering Older Adults:** The New York State Department of Offices for the Aging and the Rural Law Center have partnered in a series of educational classes to seniors living in rural counties. Each presentation had a specific focus as follows: a) Health Care Proxies and Advanced Medical Directives; b) Powers of Attorney and c) Last Will and Testaments.

**Web-Based Assistance:** In this reporting period, approximately 29,908 individuals were served through web-based assistance. We have continued to make improvements to make our website more user friendly, which has resulted in greater access for individuals on mobile devices. Individuals statewide were able to utilize our web-based assistance by reviewing substantive legal materials on numerous legal matters. Individuals were also able to download legal forms and information provided on our website. Our online library contains forms that provide direction on navigating their legal matters, forms to complete for their individual circumstances and information about how certain processes work and what to expect. Examples of this would be probate matters, adoption and guardianship issues.

## TECHNOLOGY

RLC realizes that technology is ever evolving and we have embraced it in all aspects of our operations and goals. We received a technology grant that has aided in increased efficiency, improved data management and analysis and enhanced communication and engagement with our clients and volunteers. RLC ensures and implements proper technology training and support for all staff and board members.

We continue to make improvements to our website, updating our content and providing an online intake delivery system which loads directly to our case management system. We utilize our case management system to identify where we have lower numbers of outreach, and then utilize the software on the website to determine the sources of incoming cases. We then target our less-reached communities through social media, mailings, outreach to local and state agencies, allowing us to increase our presence in needed areas.

Through the use of our website, individuals can access legal information, advice, and complete an intake for legal assistance from the comfort of their homes. Virtual hearings, video conferencing, and online dispute-resolution matters have become increasingly popular, making it possible for RLC to assist more individuals in legal matters remotely.

We continue to collaborate with Sheriff Departments and Offices for the Aging in each rural county to ensure that low-income rural residents are aware of our services. Further, we continue our efforts of ensuring that each rural county has a place that is designated as a Technology Assistance Location for the use of computers for virtual appointments and methods of communication with legal service providers and the courts.

## IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

As RLC continues to grow and evolve, we realize the significance of staying up-to-date to optimize our performance with the latest tools and technologies. As our hardware and software ages, it becomes more prone to wear and tear, slows down, and may no longer be compatible with newer pieces of technology. With funds from the 2023 Technology Grant from IOLA, we were able to purchase new desktops and laptops with updated software. The new hardware will enhance the protection of the sensitive information of clients seeking legal assistance with updated and improved features to combat data privacy, cyber security and other issues that may pose dangers with our digital delivery of our civil legal services.

With these funds, we also purchased a video conferencing device to help create an immersive hybrid meeting experience. The meeting owl is equipped with a 360-degree conference camera, microphone and speaker. These improvements in technology have helped to ensure that all aspects of our organization is running smoothly and enables our team to concentrate on efficiency for clients and expanding our outreach and building stronger networks and collaborations with other local and state agencies.

# PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

**Law Student Pro Bono Workshops:** During this reporting year, we partnered with Albany Law School students participating in the Elder Law Pro Bono Program. In our fifteenth year of this program, we worked in partnership with 9 law students. This reporting period, we were a co-host to Albany Law School's annual Veteran's Law Day and Elder Law Community Training events. As part of this program, our attorneys provided free consultations virtually which reached a total of 19 individuals.

**Attorney Pro Bono Panel:** Each year, we recruit attorneys in various geographic locations to provide pro bono services in a variety of legal matters. The attorneys have the option as to the type of matters and number of cases they would like to handle. We also call attorneys directly and make other personal contacts in high need areas to grow our list of attorneys willing to take pro bono cases. During the reporting period, we were able to add 11 new attorney volunteers to our roster.

**Attorney Emeritus:** RLC is a host organization for the New York State Unified Court System's Attorney Emeritus program volunteers. We offered training opportunities to attorneys involved in our program as they arose, and encouraged our volunteers to take part. We have also been able to ascertain what areas our volunteers would like additional training in, and provide that training as it became available. This reporting period we participating in building a new organizational profile on the New York State Unified Court System Portal for Attorney Emeritus Volunteers. The Rural Law Center was featured in the AEP Newsletter and gave several virtual presentations for volunteers on open opportunities and available training.



19

attorneys volunteered 250 hours



10

law students volunteered 30 hours



# SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

**Regional Legal Services Programs:** Approximately 28% of our client intakes come directly from the intake staff of regional upstate legal service offices. These programs refer clients to us when they are unable to provide services but their intake staff has determined there may be a need for services. In turn, if we receive an intake, and we know a legal service organization deals with a specific substantive legal issue, we will make a referral directly to the organization.

**Law Reach, Rural Constituent Legal Services:** For over 15 years, RLC has worked with rural state legislators, offering legal services to their low-income constituents who have not been able to access services from the local legal services provider. We offer a consultation, and where there are important legal issues at stake, we either represent the client, or make a pro bono referral. We work with the legislative staff to address their problem, and the combination of our legal help and their political power can make a real difference in a positive outcome for the client. This project also allows us to keep legislators informed about legal issues affecting their constituents. In 2023-24 we provided legal services to 26 individuals by referrals from 10 rural legislative offices.

**Town and Village Courts:** We are available to provide on-site mediation services for 38 town and village courts in the Third Department. In addition to these courts, there are also small city courts wherein local judges refer cases to us to help low-income litigants participate in dispute resolution for their legal issues dealing with consumer debt, evictions and family related issues. Civil small claims cases mediated in town and village or small city courts this reporting period benefited 278 individuals.

# CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

**\$ 1,397,238**

<b>City and County</b>	<b>\$ 192,334</b>
<b>IOLA Funding</b>	<b>\$ 260,000</b>
<b>Foundations</b>	<b>\$ 19,200</b>
<b>Fundraising</b>	<b>\$ 3,120</b>
<b>State Funding</b>	<b>\$ 911,111</b>

