

URBAN JUSTICE CENTER

**2023 – 2024
Report**

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The Urban Justice Center (UJC) continues to provide extraordinary legal services while expanding our services to reflect current demands. During this year, UJC closed more than 5,000 cases; provided more than 10,000 people with direct legal services; conducted approximately 6,000 in-person intakes; presented community legal education through in-person presentations to roughly 10,600 people in the community; assisted approximately 1,700 people through pro se workshops, clinics, and materials; aided around 1,100 people through multiple UJC helplines; made around 4,500 referrals for services either not provided by UJC or to supplement UJC’s services; and, worked on 14 impact cases/projects, with potentially having over 600,000 beneficiaries. We are especially proud that through UJC’s exceptional work, over \$950,000 dollars were awarded directly to clients and a value of over \$15,000 of judgments or payments were avoided.

During the 2023-2024 contract year, UJC has continued to strive in four major aspects: Fueling systemic change, building an inclusive community, defending individual rights, and providing exceptional legal services and advocacy.

To fuel systemic change, for example, the Mental Health Project (MHP) continued their systemic advocacy efforts, including the lawsuit *Amin v. Berryhill*. The *Amin* case challenges the failure of Social Security Administration to process non-disability appeals correctly and to safeguard the right to continued benefits during an appeal.

Building an inclusive community remains at the heart of UJC’s work. The Street Vendors Projects’ (SVP) legal services continue to provide a membership-based model that works in conjunction with community organizing. Trainings are provided, in 5 languages by vendors and SVP lawyers, at monthly general membership meetings where vendors gather to talk about their individual



Service Area: New York City

Population Served: General Low-Income Population

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:

Total Staff: 143	Lawyers: 57
Paralegals: 59	Others: 27

and collective problems. The Free to be Youth Project (FYP) focuses on a client-centered model for LGBTQ+ homeless youth by operating clinics at drop-in centers, after-school programs, and homeless shelters. FYP has opened 3 clinics which has led to the representation of at risk youth.

To advance and defend individual rights, the Safety Net Project (SNP) benefits team provided direct legal assistance to New Yorkers experiencing problems accessing public assistance benefits and SNAP (Food Stamp) benefits, securing over \$1.3 million in retroactive and ongoing benefits for our clients. The Sex Workers Project (SWP) serves those who work in the sex trades, whether by choice, circumstance, or coercion. This includes sex workers, survivors of human trafficking and people with criminal convictions related to sex work. As a result of SWP's work, A large number of people benefitted because their clients were granted asylum status, lawful permanent residence, and/or citizenship.

Lastly, providing extraordinary legal services and advocacy is shown by the Domestic Violence Project (DVP) serving approximately 1,800 survivors of intimate partner violence with multiple matters. The overwhelming majority of clients served have a minimum of two children in their household. At DVP, assistance is provided on matters such as custody/visitation; child/spousal support, and orders of protection.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

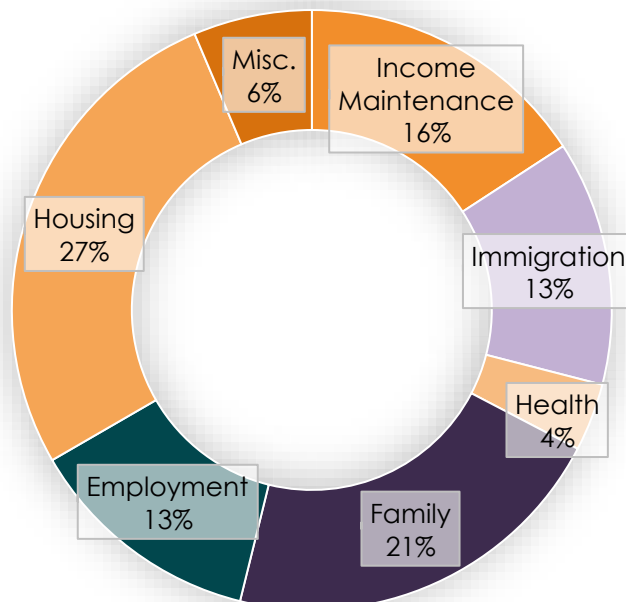
Primary Area of Law – Immigration, Case Example #1: SWP's Client is a transgender woman and citizen of Mexico, for whom SWP previously won asylum. SWP represented her at a naturalization interview. Client had six arrests, almost all of which were the result of laws criminalizing sex work. During the naturalization interview, SWP was able to convince the officer that based on a reading of the law that Client need not check "yes" to the "have you ever been a prostitute" based on the level of regularity and continuity for someone to be considered "engaging in prostitution." For naturalization, the legal bar to establishing good moral character references being "INVOLVED in prostitution," rather than "ENGAGING in prostitution," and the USCIS officer had a back and forth with SWP about whether or not the "regular" and "continuous" aspects applied in this context. In the end, Client was able to maintain her answer as "no" to the "have you ever been a prostitute" question and left the interview without knowing whether her naturalization application was approved. Client recently received notice that she won her case, showing SWP's expertise on the intersections of immigration law and prostitution criminalization statute.



Primary Area of Law – Housing, Case Example #2: MHP assisted a client, who receives Social Security Disability Insurance benefits, and was extremely close to being evicted from their permanent supportive housing apartment because they owed \$6,700.00 in rent arrears. MHP did an intake with the client 8 business days before the Marshal was scheduled to change the locks. The client had no legal representation and had applied for a one-shot deal at the HRA office but was unable to obtain the required documents. Our team obtained the documents from the housing provider two days later and submitted it to HRA.

MHP advocated for HRA to process the application as quickly as possible and submitted proof that client had paid rent for the month. The client had an APS caseworker assigned who was hard to reach and not providing support. The APS regional director was contacted and support from APS to file the order to show cause at the court was requested. Three days before the scheduled eviction, HRA approved the application. MHP staff picked up the checks from HRA and brought them to the client’s housing program, and the eviction was cancelled. This is an eviction prevention case which required communication with higher ups at HRA, APS, and the supportive housing provider. MHP is one of only a few organizations throughout New York City that assists with one-shot deals.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA:



OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

UJC provides many forms of community legal education, pro se assistance, referrals, and Know Your Rights trainings/workshops. This includes community legal education for low-income New Yorkers on matters such as housing, employment, public benefits, identification documentation, consumer debt, and immigration, street vendor rights, licenses, and employment, and transactional legal assistance to community-based nonprofit organizations in low-income communities.

SNP conducts bi-weekly meetings of current or formerly homeless New Yorkers directly impacted by the welfare system to provide educational materials and opportunities to contribute to legislative campaigns. In December 2023, SNP helped organize a meeting with coalition partners that was convened by the City Council Speakers Office to discuss key changes needed in housing voucher and benefits processing in NYC that was attended by key staff from the Speaker's Office, Finance committee, and General Welfare. Our staff and members specifically raised issues related to the need for more staffing at HRA and the need to expedite hiring so that community members can contact the Agency and their delays in their benefits can be addressed.

MHP provides advocacy courses to community members who have mental health concerns and are experiencing poverty. The goal of these courses is to develop, improve, and practice oral advocacy skills to address both individual issues and to create systemic change on local and state

1,700

people
benefited
from

**Pro Se
Assistance**

2,079

people
benefited
from

**Community
Legal
Education**

1,896

people
benefited
from

**Web-Based
Assistance**

levels. In February 2024, MHP relaunched, after COVID closures, a monthly Open Mic Night (OMN) series. OMN is an opportunity to foster a safe space for our community by showcasing people's talents and interests through song, poetry, and music.

DVP provides online outreach, CLE, and pro se assistance as part of its grassroots organizing efforts. Online outreach includes materials and information posted on our website and social media platforms. For example, DVP launched a YouTube Channel after March of 2020 in order to provide free, on-demand Know Your Rights (KYR) trainings to survivors, advocates, and the community at large. To respond to an increase in demand for immigration legal services, particularly from recently arrived asylum seekers, SWP has developed a targeted pro se assistance program to provide limited assistance to as many individuals as possible, particularly for asylum seekers with pressing application filing deadlines, including preparing asylum applications, change of venue motions, and employment authorization document applications.

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SNP conducts outreach clinics and building outreach to advise NYCHA tenants and to connect them with SNP's legal services to address housing issues. This year SNP conducted a public campaign, including social media, regarding SNAP skimming and replacement benefits to ensure people were aware of the information needed to file claims before the impending deadline.

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IMPACT CASES

Impact Case Example #1: MHP’s Criminal Justice Advocacy team continues to monitor the Brad H. settlement agreement, which requires NYC to provide discharge planning services, including referrals for continued mental health and substance use treatment, medication, and public benefits, to people who receive mental health treatment in jail. The size of the Brad H. class has increased to 3,406 beneficiaries. MHP interviewed 955 class members in-person and 6 by phone, for a total of 961. MHP informs class members whom we interview or contact by mail of their discharge planning rights and advocate for those who have not received services.

Impact Case Example #2: In 2023, MHP celebrated a settlement in *Amin v. Kijakazi*, an impact case challenging SSA’s systemic failure to timely process non-disability appeals and failure to protect SSI claimants’ right to ongoing benefits on appeal. The litigation pushed SSA to make improvements over the past two years and to expand the appeal rights of SSI recipients to maintain access to their benefits during non-disability appeals. This case benefits all current SSI beneficiaries in the State of New York, which currently number 80,443 individuals under the age of 18 and 540,777 individuals over the age of 18.

Impact Case Example #3: SVP continues to litigate the *Ahmed v. City of NY* class action on behalf of over 300 vendors for reimbursement for the carts and other vending property which were illegally seized and destroyed by City enforcement agents during “task force sweeps” of various neighborhoods in the City. The matter was settled in 2019.

All Impact Cases

- 1193-1205 Eastern Parkway Tenant Association, et ano., v. STF 1193-1205 Eastern Pkwy Holding LLC, Phillips Nizer LLP, Barberry Rose Management Co., Inc., Silverman, DHPD
- *Rafel Abelo et al vs. The City of New York et al*, 452415/2022
- 117 West 141 LLC vs. Michelle Paer, Index No. LT 308389-21 /NY
- *Ana Galvez et. al. v. 249 E 149 LLC*, LT 300171-22/BX
- Advocacy against discrimination in supportive housing
- Advocacy against sweeps of homeless encampments
- Advocacy to increase CityFHEPS rent levels
- Advocacy in coalition with other legal service providers to increase cash assistance levels
- Advocacy to address SNAP application processing delays
- Continued advocacy to ensure Right to Counsel full implementation during the eviction crisis

- City of Grants Pass Oregon v. Gloria Johnson et al 23-175, Supreme Court of the United States (amicus curiae brief)
- Brad H v. City of New York
- Amin v. Kijakazi
- Ahmed v. City of NY

In January 2024, SVP, with pro bono assistance, filed an additional memo to support our 2021 Cy Pres motion for the distribution of the remaining settlement funds. The motion is still pending. enforcement agents during “task force sweeps” of various neighborhoods in the City. The matter was settled in 2019. In January 2024, SVP, with pro bono assistance, filed an additional memo to support our 2021 Cy Pres motion for the distribution of the remaining settlement funds. The motion is still pending.

TECHNOLOGY

In March 2020, UJC closed their physical office due to the COVID-19 epidemic. UJC made significant improvements to deliver remote legal services via the internet. Some improvements to our technology include but not limited to: migrated the phone system from in-office to cloud-based IP phone system, migrated file server to cloud-based Sharepoint environment, purchased new laptops for workforce, trained users to use tools such as Zoom to collaborate remotely and to conduct webinars, and rolled out remote deployment and remote access software and configuration. UJC attorneys appeared in court remotely and provided advice and counsel to clients via telephone and a variety of web-based platforms such as Zoom.

SWP improved their excel spreadsheet-based immigration legal services waitlist and learned new strategies to improve the collection and organization of client data. And this year, SWP began electronic filing for cases with United States Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) while expanding a practice of appearing for hearings by video teleconference. During 2023, UJC has been able to start reopening the physical office while continuing to provide remote services. The use of in-person and remote offering made UJC more accessible for clients.



IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

UJC used the supplemental technology grant funds to update and expand our infrastructure to enhance our hybrid work areas. Specifically, we used the funds to cover part of our NetSuite subscription and to cover our monthly services with our IT consultant, Dega. The NetSuite software allowed us to streamline and strengthen our fiscal operation which led to more efficient reporting. And our IT consultant services provided support to ensure our various technologies work including changes to Legal Server when reporting standards are updated. These services are crucial to ensuring UJC's permanent hybrid work structure continues to function for our staff and our clients. This grant allowed us to reinforce our technology structure and provide ongoing support to our staff.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

UJC significantly utilizes pro-bono attorneys, law students, and social work interns, across several legal practice areas, while also offering appropriate trainings and supervision. This reporting period, MHP hosted 4 social work interns, 3 undergraduate interns, and 2 legal interns in the Health Justice Advocacy.

Students from NYU Law School's Solitary Confinement Project contribute to our criminal justice advocacy work. DVP hosts law students for an entire semester to manage client intakes and provide support on attorneys' caseloads. SWP recruits and trains law students in gathering evidence, filing forms, drafting briefs, and building affidavits. SNP has an intern program coordinator who recruits interns for SNP's programs via a range of channels to ensure diversity. These include, the PILC fair, CUNY Service Corps, Hunter College's Public Service Scholar Program, the Pro Bono Scholar program, and more. All interns receive intentional training and are allocated a direct supervisor who ensure they have ongoing support, a strong educational experience, and varied work opportunities.

Debevoise & Plimpton partnered with MHP and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) in representing the Brad H. Class. Attorneys from Skadden represented UJC pro bono in the Article 78 proceeding against the NYS Justice Center. Students from NYU Law School's Solitary Confinement Project contribute to our criminal justice advocacy work. FYP managed

nearly 100 cases in the past year with the direct services supported by law students and pro bono support.

DVP works with a network of pro bono attorneys to provide support on complicated and unique legal matters, and to take on specific case types from our wait list, such as VAWA Self-Petitions for immigration clients. UJC volunteers assist with a range of other program needs such as social media outreach and management, intake line management, and translations.

44attorneys volunteered **4,361** hours**26**law students volunteered **8,664** hours**15**other volunteers volunteered **154** hours

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

Collaborations are a significant part of UJC's work. Collaborating with an agency can strengthen the reach an organization has with the community members. SNP operates walk-in legal clinics at multiple nonprofit organizations and is an active member of the LEAP Coalition, the NYS Legal Services Association, the NYC All County Tenant Lawyers Network. MHP played a significant role in advocating for a City Council bill to end solitary confinement in NYC jails, and the project is part of the Treatment Not Jail coalition coordinated by New York County Defender Services.

MHP is also an active member of the Medicaid Matters New York coalition, which is dedicated to advancing interests of Medicaid beneficiaries. Through MMNY, MHP monitors new legislation and advocates for people with mental health concerns in NYC.

SWP receives referrals for LGBTQ sex workers in deportation proceedings from the Ark Immigration Clinic at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, Betances, AIDS Center of Queens County, New York City Anti-Violence Project, and others. SVP joined the “Street Vendor Justice Coalition” comprised of Arab American Association, Council on American Islamic Relations, Jews For Racial & Economic Justice, New York Immigration Coalition, Open Plans, Riders Alliance, and others. The coalition has been pushing for reforms including Legislative bills at the NYC City Council for full formalization of the vending industry among other changes.

DVP has forged strong relationships with agencies that focus on serving specific populations and sub-populations with critical expertise beyond DVP’s scope. Notably this year, DVP has developed a strong partnership with ID Studio Theater who provide trauma-informed “healing through movement” workshops. FYP is building relationships through the opening of three clinics at various LGBTQIA+ youth serving organizations in Manhattan.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 32,987,295

City and County	\$ 15,491,626
IOLA Funding	\$ 467,976
Foundations	\$ 3,371,213
Federal	\$ 6,591,267
Fundraising	\$ 1,553,132
State Funding	\$ 3,756,981
Other	\$ 1,755,101

