

WESTERN NEW YORK LAW CENTER

2022-2023

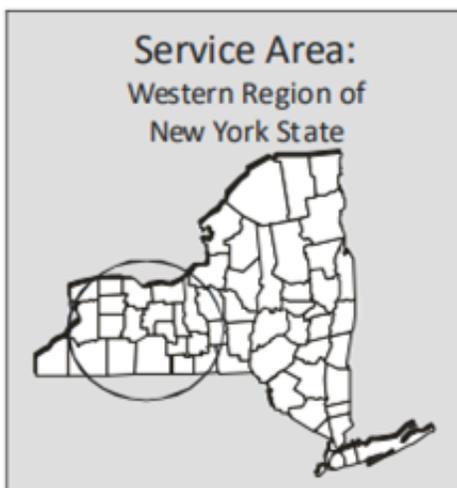
OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The Law Center attorneys and staff are dedicated to ensuring that low-income Western New Yorkers receive the highest quality legal representation and access to necessary resources. During the reporting period, we continued to provide an array of services, including foreclosure defense and prevention eviction prevention, bankruptcy representation, small business services, consumer debt defense, and suspension prevention services for students.

Additionally, the Law Center continued to provide the legal services community with technology support and statewide coordination assistance to enhance the delivery of legal services to low-income persons. As a part of our technology services, WNYLC continued to maintain over 50 email lists and screen and review applications for new subscriptions. We also maintain the Online Resource Center with the Empire Justice Center, the Legal Aid Society, and NYLAG. The site contains a brief bank, a bank of annotated and digested fair hearing decisions, and video trainings. There were over 2 million downloads of legal articles and materials from the site during the reporting period. The discussion groups have 8,820 subscribers (3,956 unique subscribers) and contain 40,591 searchable attachments posted by users.

The primary target population of our civil legal services include low-income individuals in Unit 7 and parts of Unit 6, who require assistance in obtaining and maintaining the basic necessities of life, including housing, food, and subsistence-level income. During the reporting period, cases handled by the Law Center benefited 5,869 people, and generated over \$5 million dollars in savings for our clients.

The Law Center significantly increased its capacity to meet the high unmet legal needs of our clients and communities by enlisting the help of 34 attorney and



Population Served: General Low Income Populations

Total Funding: \$3,171,397

Total IOLA Grant: \$413,040

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 40.66
- Paralegals: 16.15
- Lawyers: 17.71
- Other: 6.8

non-attorney volunteers who provided nearly 1500 hours of service. During the reporting period, 16 law students and two AmeriCorps volunteers supported our clinics and other programs.

To enhance the capacity of staff to deliver high-quality services to our existing and new clients, the Law Center hired an Operations Manager and a Grant Manager/Bookkeeper. The Grant Manager/Bookkeeper is responsible for developing a grant administration process, assisting with reports, ensuring compliance with grant requirements, overseeing proper grant allocation, overseeing invoicing, and documenting payments and expenditures. Our new Grant Manager/Bookkeeper will improve our bill payment and reimbursement processes and help to reduce our outsourcing costs, increase efficiency, and improve the financial checks and balances system.

The Operations Manager is responsible for identifying organizational needs and developing solutions, developing administrative policies and procedures with input from the management team, arranging staff and board trainings, assist with talent recruitment, developing an onboarding process, and managing the operational and administrative staff. She will also be responsible for managing office outreach efforts to ensure that our outreach efforts are coordinated and purposeful. She has been working with staff to create job descriptions for all employees and is in the process of hiring an outsourced HR company to help with recruitment, onboarding, performance management, and to ensure that we are in compliance with all applicable employment laws and regulations. The addition of this position will relieve other staff from having to perform these functions and allow them to focus on meeting the needs of clients and the organization's goals.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES: CASES

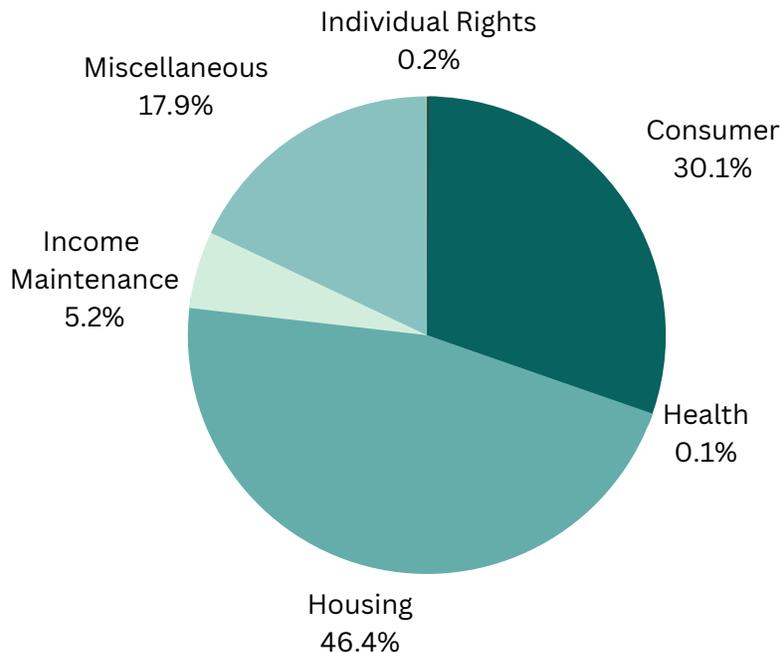
Small Business

Ms. R visited one of the Small Business Legal Clinic's (SBLC) drop-in clinics in her neighborhood for assistance with starting her own catering business and food truck. She recently immigrated to WNY after escaping violence in her home country. Instead of finding a job to simply earn a paycheck, she wanted to start this business to bring a piece of her childhood to her new home and to pay tribute to her father. SBLC helped Ms. R to form her LLC and reviewed the lease she eventually signed to secure a commercial kitchen space. SBLC also tapped into its small business partner network to connect Ms. R with a business advisor to work on her business plan, and a local community development financial institution to secure financing to get her business up and running.

Housing

Ms. W’s home was scheduled to be sold in the tax auctions when she applied for assistance through the BEHAF program. Her property taxes, water bill, and user fees were all in arrears. During the application process, we discovered that her water bill was up to \$40,992.60 because of a previous water leak. Ms. W. has several disabilities and is caring for her fully disabled mother, and although she had returned to work after a long period of unemployment, she had no prospects of paying a \$40,992.60 water bill in addition to all her other bills. The Law Center processed Ms. W’s BEHAF application, gathered all her supporting documentation, and submitted her application to New York State for approval. Ms. W’s application was approved and a total of \$54,881.89 was sent directly to the City of Buffalo, the Buffalo Water Department, and Erie County. Ms. W is no longer at risk of losing her home and having her water turned off.

5,869
people
benefitted from
3,306
legal cases
closed



Cases by Legal Problem Area

OTHER SERVICES: OVERVIEW

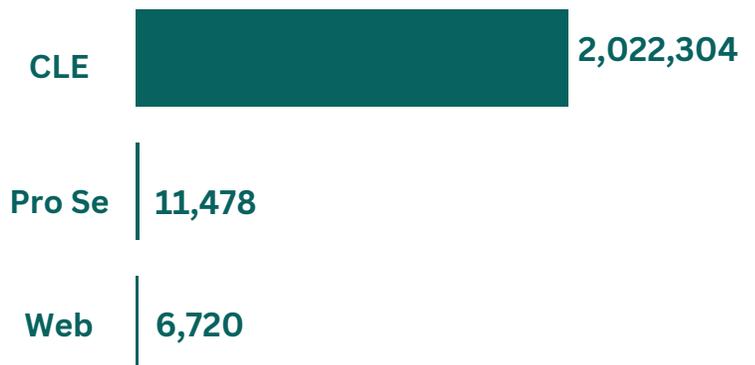
During the reporting period, the Law Center provided a wide range of legal related services. These services included educational workshops, webinars, on-line materials, and pro se clinics. We provided community legal education on a variety of topics including school discipline, foreclosure prevention, consumer law, and Chapter 7 bankruptcies.

The Law Center continued to offer targeted workshops for small business owners and entrepreneurs and consumers. The goal of the SBLC workshops is to make entrepreneurs and small businesses aware of regulatory requirements. The Law Center also continued to offer informational sessions for individuals interested in filing for bankruptcy. The bankruptcy sessions are remote and allow visitors to ask questions about the legal process, our bankruptcy program, and their individual financial situations. The goal of the bankruptcy informational sessions is to educate prospective clients so they can make informed decisions before deciding to file for bankruptcy.

We also continued to operate drop-in SBLC and CLARO clinics. These clinics are open to the public on a “first come – first served” basis. The target population for SBLC drop-in clinics are low-income, minority and/or immigrant entrepreneurs who want to start or have already started a for-profit business in our service area. The target population for our CLARO clinic are unrepresented, low-income consumers. Our clinics provided pro se assistance to 631 visitors. Finally, we mailed and handed out 19,483 legal education brochures. The Law Center’s service delivery strategy focuses on providing free competent legal services to our target population.

2,040,402
people
benefitted from
Services Other
Than Direct
Legal Services

Number of People Benefitted from Other Services



OTHER SERVICES: TECHNOLOGY

The Law Center implemented a new cloud-based case management system in the last reporting period and recorded trainings for staff on its use. We also partnered with TheFormTool, a macro-based document assembly company and continued to use forms to generate pleadings in our consumer clinics. We continued our partnership with students at Columbia Law School and expanded client portals for our Bankruptcy program and the Generational Wealth program. The latter program helps people in low-income communities obtain wills. We continued to add materials to the statewide Online Resource Center and to maintain email lists for advocates across the state in several areas, including domestic violence, disability, and housing. We continue to offer volunteers pro bono hours for work through our online portals. Additionally, we are using Teams, part of Office365, to allow staff in each practice area to meet and communicate easily.

OTHER SERVICES: TRAININGS

New staff complete assigned training according to their practice areas and we pair them with senior staff to facilitate learning and development. The office maintains listservs to keep all staff up to date on legislative changes and substantive law developments. Staff members participate in statewide committees, workgroups, and task forces relative to their practice area. Law Center staff currently maintains leadership roles in the NYRL Mortgage, Consumer Finance, and Student Lending workgroups. The Law Center has bi-weekly attorney meetings, where each department presents on an interesting case or legal issue. We pay for all Bar memberships and CLEs. During the reporting period, the Law Center met with a consultant whose expertise include strategic planning and board governance to explore training opportunities for board members.

The Law Center in-house experts trained staff and volunteers on a variety of topics, such as the Debt Collection Process, the CLARO Clinic Roadmap, and the Ethics of Limited Scope Representation. All staff are trained on the basics of our core services, client interviewing, and case management.

Attorneys attend national conferences pertinent to their practice areas to stay current on developments in the law, build relationships with other practitioners, and to learn new litigation tools and strategies. Training materials from each conference are saved in a training materials repository that is accessible by all staff. During the reporting period, attorneys attended the ABA Business Law Section Spring meeting, the Fair Credit Reporting Act Conference, and the Consumer Rights Litigation Conference.

IMPACT CASES

Chipecto et al. v. Five Star Bank et al.:

The Law Center, together with Pennsylvania co-counsel, represents putative classes that include approximately 5,000 New York class members with statutory damages claims totaling around \$50 million. The lawsuit challenges Five Star Bank's repossession practices. Both New York class representatives started as CLARO visitors. The court granted Plaintiffs' motion for class certification, certified four classes and appointed the Law Center and co-counsel as class counsel. There is currently an interlocutory appeal pending from the trial court's denial of Defendants' motion to dismiss for lack of standing.

Greater Chautauqua Federal Credit Union et al. v. Marks et al.:

The Law Center and one of its clients are proposed intervenors in this case filed by three credit unions to challenge New York's Fair Consumer Judgment Interest Act, in which New York retroactively reduced the interest rate for consumer debt judgments from 9% to 2%. The intervenors seek to make a motion for an order narrowing the court's preliminary injunction only as to judgments in favor of the plaintiffs, rather than all judgment creditors in the State. The court recently denied the intervention motion, and the proposed intervenors have filed an appeal.

Black Love Resists et al v. City of Buffalo et al.:

In June 2018, the Law Center along with the Center for Constitutional Rights and the National Center for Law and Economic Justice filed a federal class-action lawsuit against the City of Buffalo challenging the city's unconstitutional and racially discriminatory vehicle checkpoints and traffic ticketing practices. According to the lawsuit, the Buffalo Police Department deployed unconstitutional vehicle checkpoints in Black and Latinx neighborhoods, resulting in massive overticketing of these communities—and significant revenue for the city.

56,797

beneficiaries
were affected by

5

Impact Cases

All Impact Cases

***Chipecto et al. v.
Five Star Bank et al.***

***White et al. v.
Fein, Such & Crane***

***Black Love Resists et al v.
City of Buffalo
et al. (NCLEJ)***

***Greater Chautauqua Federal
Credit Union et al. v.
Marks et al.
(Mobilization for Justice)***

McCoy v. Restiano

The plaintiffs are Black Love Resists in the Rust, a police accountability organization, and individuals who were subject to suspicionless checkpoint stops. We are currently in the “discovery” phase of the lawsuit. On April 10th, the court granted the plaintiffs’ motion to take an additional eight depositions and extended the discovery deadline. This case will benefit 90,000 individuals.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

The Law Center regularly enlists the help of law students and private attorneys to meet the needs of our clients. During the reporting period, the Law Center worked with 34 attorney and non-attorney volunteers who provided 1,499 hours of service. We recruit law students from Columbia Law School and the University of Buffalo Law School. We also partner with Daemen College to recruit paralegal students for volunteer opportunities. We also recruit undergrad students to assist with intake at the CLARO clinic and at housing court. Columbia Law students through the school’s “Lawyering in the Digital Age” clinic help us with special projects that integrate technology and legal practice. The Law Center collaborates with UB Law School to provide hands-on experience to students at clinics and through internships.

During the reporting period, we expanded our partnership with UB Law School by collaborating with the Law School’s Civil Rights and Transparency Clinic. Our CLARO attorneys provided in-class training for students to explain the clinic and their role at the clinic. On March 6, 2023, the CLARO managing attorney appeared on NPR along with a UB Law volunteer to discuss the clinic. [Buffalo, What's Next? | Tops Survivors, Disputing Debt | WBFO.](#)



5 Attorneys volunteered 87 hours

16 Law Students volunteered 738 hours

13 Other Volunteers volunteered 674 hours

Each  icon is equal to ~3.4 volunteers.
Attorneys are represented through the Green Figure.
Law Students and Other Volunteers are represented through the Grey Figure.

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

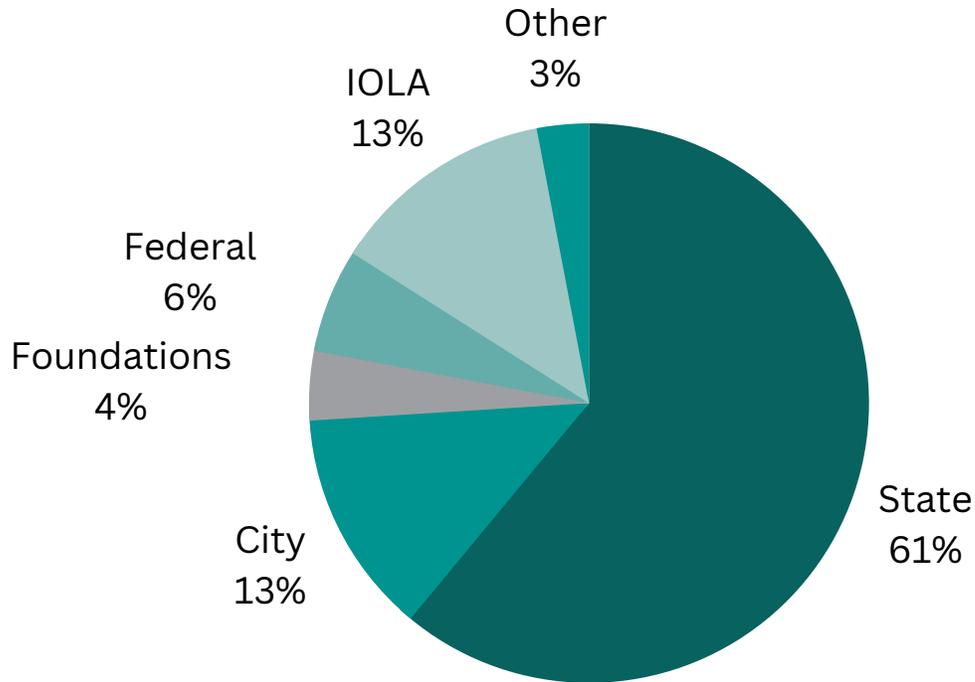
The Law Center continued to collaborate with our existing partners and, as importantly, we have formed new relationships and partnerships with community-based organizations and legal service providers. During the reporting period, the Law Center, NLS, CELJ, LABB, and VLP worked together as the WNY Eviction Prevention project, to provide legal representation to tenants facing eviction in Erie, Genesee, Niagara, and Wyoming Counties. During the reporting period, the Law Center handled 518 eviction cases and 503 calls through the eviction hotline. In addition to the eviction hotline, the Law Center operates the Stay in your Home, Foreclosure and Property Taxes hotlines. Additionally, we worked with CELJ and LABB to provide foreclosure prevention services in Western New York as part of the Foreclosure Prevention Project (FPP). We also continued our partnership with Belmont Housing and the Buffalo Urban League, to provide housing counseling services to homeowners.

This year, the Law Center began collaborating with Community Health Worker Network of Buffalo (CoNECT), the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), the University of Buffalo Law School, the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition (ECRJC), LABB, and others, to form the BPS Suspension Prevention, Diversion and Representation Project. This project is aimed at lowering the rate of suspensions in the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS). The Law Center staff is providing legal representation at hearings, community education, and assisting with the training of advocates and law students to represent students at suspension hearings. During the reporting period, we participated in the planning of two “Know Your Rights” sessions with our partners. From September 2022 through March 2023, the BPS issued 4267 short-term suspensions and 870 long-term suspensions; the formation of this coalition will be instrumental in lowering the suspension rates in the BPS and reducing the school-to-prison pipeline.

We meet regularly with our local legal services partners to ensure that we are not duplicating services. In addition to our collaborations with other IOLA grantees to provide foreclosure and eviction services, we also collaborated with NLS, CELJ, VLP, LABB, and the Child and Family Services (C&FS) on a joint proposal to the Office of Victim Services for a collaborative legal clinic. The funds were earmarked for the East Side of Buffalo after the 5/14 tragedy. The partners operate monthly clinics on the East Side. Each clinic is accompanied by a “Know Your Rights” presentation on several topics, including tax preparation, evictions, bankruptcy, debt collection, foreclosure, child support, divorce, and child custody. C&FS will be present at each clinic to assist with screening cases for referral to each legal organization. This joint initiative provides much needed legal services.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

Western New York Law Center received
\$3,171,397
 in total funding this past year



Foundations	\$114,187
IOLA Grant	\$413,040
City and County Funding	\$408,504
Federal	\$186,371
State Funding	\$1,927,211
Other	\$122,084
Total	\$3,171,397