

RURAL LAW CENTER

2022-2023

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The past year was very productive for the Rural Law Center. In this reporting period, approximately 39,894 individuals were served through the Rural Law Center’s initiatives (people benefited through legal civil services closed cases 4,508; community legal education 4,545; pro se assistance 684; website assistance 29,038; and mediation services 1,119). RLC provided services for a total of 2,685 cases (1,739 closed and 946 cases currently open). We were able to resolve and close 1,739 cases for 4,508 low-income individuals and families residing in the 44 rural counties of New York State. This reporting period, our total services resulted in approximately \$852,430 in dollar benefits to our clients through lump sum awards and settlements, as well as \$853,539 in dollar savings to clients. Further, we estimate a total of \$931,833 in client savings of legal fees for the services RLC provided.

There was an 11% increase in people benefited from the prior reporting year. This increase included clients with matters that required assistance with: Housing Stability- Preventing homelessness by fighting wrongful evictions and foreclosures, ensuring that uninhabitable 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.



Population Served:

General Low Income Populations

Total Funding: \$1,128,075

Total IOLA Grant: \$179,500

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 15.75
- Paralegals: 6.5
- Lawyers: 6
- Other: 3.25

We continued to assist self-represented parties by reviewing and completing court documents in matters involving family law, evictions, consumer debt issues and a range of other civil legal matters. Further, this reporting year, we tracked referrals that we made to local, state, federal and private organizations/foundations who assisted with other non-legal issues that our clients were facing. We reached out to specific organizations/foundations and discussed the circumstances of the referral, we refer to these as warm referrals. As a result, our referrals increased to 362 this reporting period, 167 of which were warm referrals.

We continue growing our remote and hybrid work with our clients and communities. This reporting period we held virtual workshops on uncontested divorces and bankruptcies. We also held virtual trainings in multiple rural locations across the state on Elder Abuse and Elder Law issues, along with virtual workshops in correctional facilities for our Re-Entry Assistance Training Program.

We reached 4,545 low-income rural residents through community legal education, consisting of vulnerable residents still feeling the after effects of Covid-19 in the form of lost wages, 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. We partnered with Albany Law School, New York State Prisons, New York Offices for the Aging in various counties, and provided legal educational material to county sheriff departments in the 44 rural counties that we serve. Our attorneys hosted legal education presentations virtually and in person for individuals and family members.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES: CASES

Housing

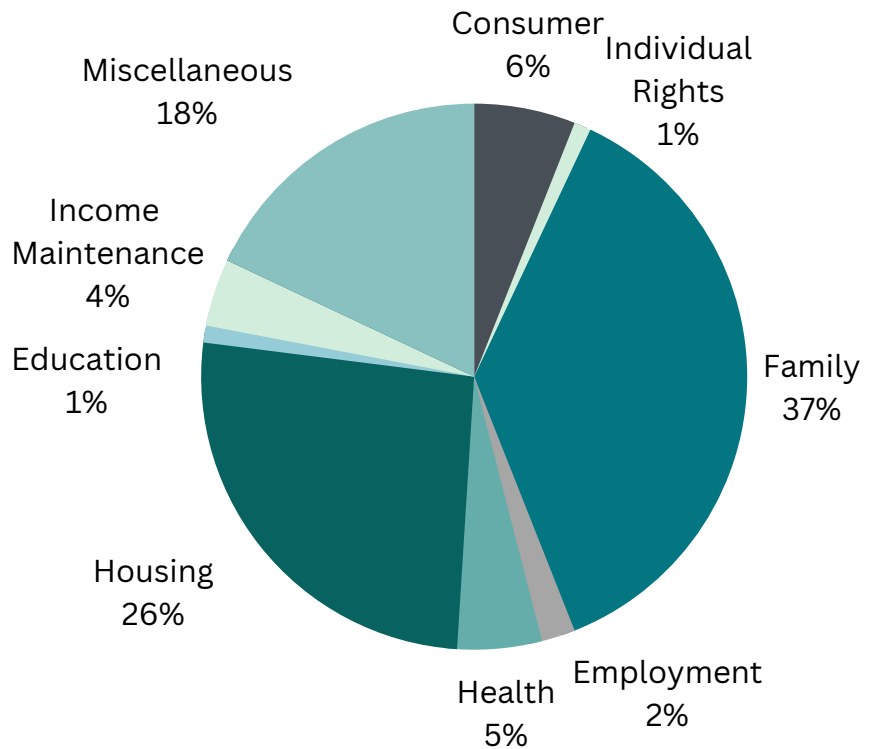
An elderly client was in danger of being homeless as a result of her housing voucher being terminated. The client received housing assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher Program, a Community Development Program in her rural county. Her housing voucher was terminated due to the Program wrongfully determining that our client violated the Program's rules. The client was being forced to leave her apartment, as a result of not being able to pay the rent without her housing voucher. Losing this assistance also meant that she could not rent another apartment as she could not afford to pay on her own. Our attorneys reviewed and discussed the matter with the client and attended two hearings with the client and her witnesses.

Our office argued on behalf of our client and requested the reinstatement of our client’s housing assistance. While appearing at the second hearing and upon review of the issues and facts, the client’s housing voucher was fully reinstated.

4,508
people benefitted from
1,739
legal cases closed

Income Maintenance

A disabled client came to us seeking assistance when his Supplemental Security Income being terminated due to a transfer of real property from the client to his estranged spouse. Our attorneys prepared and submitted an appeal based on an exception to the transfer of assets rule in the 42 USC §1382b and the Social Security Program Operations Manual. Upon the client advising our office that the Social Security caseworker had his case in a “holding status”, our attorney contacted the caseworker and discussed the exception to the transfer of assets rule. Upon submission of additional documentation, the client’s benefits were reinstated in full. The client lived alone on a fixed income. Without his Supplemental Security Income, the client’s basic needs (housing, food and co-pays for his medications) were in jeopardy.



**Cases by
Legal Problem
Area**

OTHER SERVICES: OVERVIEW

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, health care proxies, advanced medical directives, powers of attorney, 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 885.

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 834.

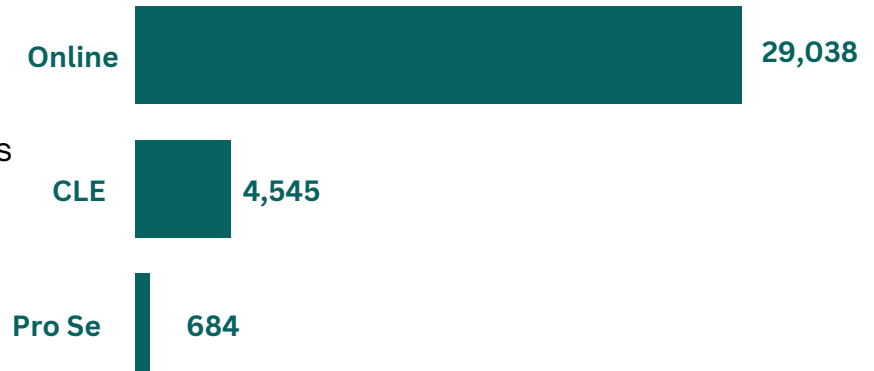
34,267
people benefitted
from Services Other
Than Direct Legal
Services

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, child care advocates, and potential kinship and/or foster care providers. The total number of people served in this reporting period is 791.

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 1,119.

Number of People Benefitted from Other Services



OTHER SERVICES: TECHNOLOGY

We continue to make improvements on our website, updating our content and providing an online intake delivery system which loads directly to Legal Server (case management system). We implemented the use of software to better track our internet traffic in order for us to better serve our vast geographical area. We continue to utilize Legal Server 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.

Further, we have collaborated with New York State Offices for the Aging and are in the process 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.

OTHER SERVICES: TRAININGS

We consider staff development and training a priority. All staff are required to participate in a variety of educational experiences, including improving technology skills and diversity training. Some examples of this year’s trainings:

- **NYCON Conferences** are held annually and are mandatory for Fiscal Director, Program Director and Executive Director to attend. Subject matters covered are Nonprofit Accounting; Accountability and Compliance; Fundraising and Communications and Nonprofit Governance.

- **Financial management and updated Accounting for Not for Profits** is required for our Fiscal Director and Executive Director.
- **Statewide Civil Legal Aid Technology Conferences** are mandatory for Fiscal Director, Program Director and Executive Director. This program has been in person and web based. This year Board Members attended this conference as well.
- **Equal Justice Conference** is voluntary for Executive Director and Program Director. Planning was made for the Program Director to attend the 2023 Equal Justice Conference in Dallas, TX.
- **Basic Training Mediation** is available for our new mediation volunteers, an apprenticeship period, as well as receiving a mandatory 6 hours each year of continuing education in the field. This reporting period we trained 7 individuals in Basic Mediation Training and 5 individuals in Family Mediation.
- **Legal Server training** was mandatory for all attorneys and staff to ensure continued efficiency of our caseload management system.
- **Sexual Harassment training** is mandatory annually for all attorneys, staff and board members.
- **Board Member trainings:** Annual training on Board Guidance and Training, Building a Diverse and Equitable Workspace; Diversity and Inclusion Training and many IT Security Protection Measures.

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 10 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 31 clients.

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 15 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 provided that training as it became available.



37 Attorneys volunteered 222 hours

10 Law Students volunteered 18 hours

Each  icon is equal to 4.7 volunteers.

Attorneys are represented through the Green Figure.

Law Students and Other Volunteers are represented through the Grey Figure.

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

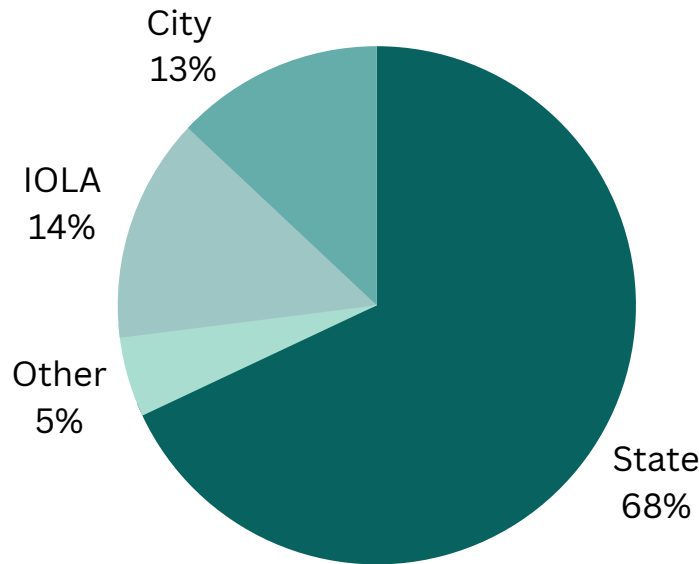
Regional Legal Services Programs: Approximately 25% of our client intakes come directly from the intake staff of regional upstate legal service offices. These programs refer clients to us when they are unable to provide services but their intake staff has determined there may be a need for services. In turn, if we receive an intake, and we know a legal service organization deals with a specific substantive legal issue, we make a direct referral to that organization.

Law Reach - Rural Constituent Legal Services: For over 14 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 2022-23 we provided legal services to 17 individuals by referrals from 6 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 is 203.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

Rural Law Center received
\$1,280,075
 in total funding this past year



IOLA Grant	\$179,500
City and County Funding	\$170,636
State Funding	\$866,299
Other	\$63,640
Total	\$1,280,075