



LEGAL AID
CHICAGO

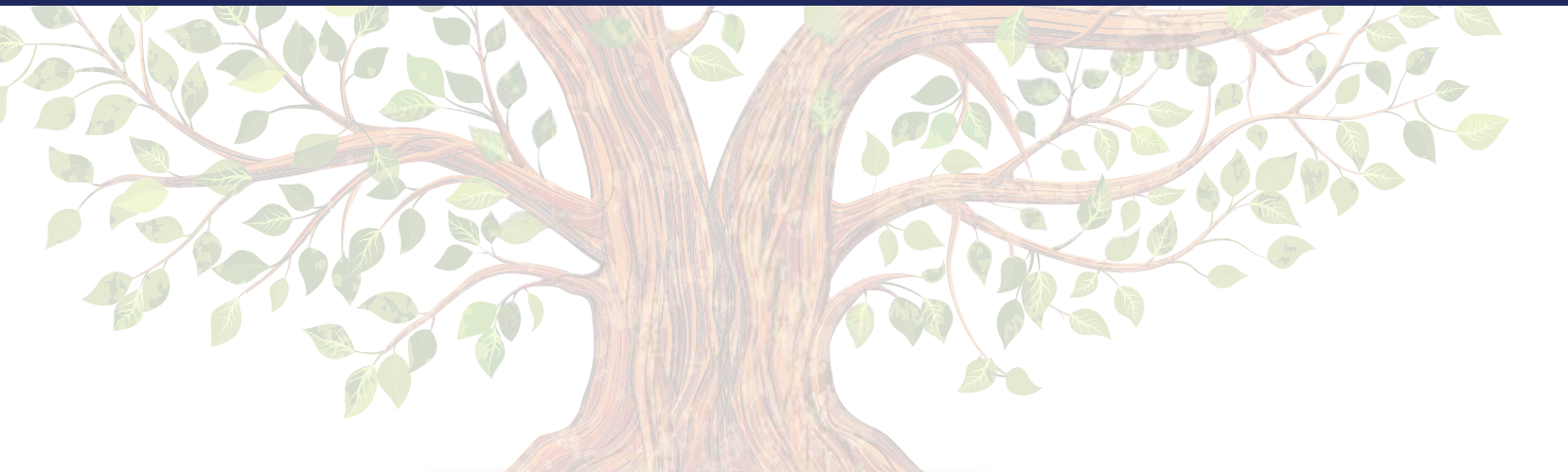
STAYING TRUE TO OUR ROOTS

Annual Report 2023




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WELCOME FROM OUR CO-CHAIRS AND CEO/ED



For over fifty years, Legal Aid Chicago has maintained a clear commitment to justice and equity and been a steadfast advocate for the most vulnerable members of our community. **Since our founding, we have remained true to our roots, providing free legal services to those who need it most.**

In many ways, Legal Aid Chicago looks very different from decades past. We changed our name in 2018 (formerly known as LAF or Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago). We now also have a bigger staff (over 200 full-time people) and a single, primary office in downtown Chicago.

In recent years, we have expanded our services to include, among other things, **expungement/sealing of criminal records** which allows people to get a fresh start and probate representation to help **preserve family assets**. **We also represent survivors of human trafficking** statewide. We have increased our appellate work to ensure **survivors of domestic violence** receive the protections previously denied to them by lower courts. Lastly, we have added nearly 20 projects where we work closely with **volunteer attorneys** to increase our reach.

Our **Low-Income Tax Clinic** assists low-income clients with their IRS tax disputes, and we have a team helping **veterans** to obtain their service-connected benefits. We have staff dedicated to serving **people who are homeless** and others who work closely with doctors and other medical providers who have identified **patients with health-harming legal issues**. **Seniors and people with disabilities** are now able to make long-term plans regarding their healthcare and property decisions with the help of our in-house advocates and volunteers. These are just a few of the areas where we have expanded our work and populations where we have focused staff to assist.



Katherine W. Shank
Chief Executive Officer &
Executive Director

Virxhini Gjonzeneli
2024 Co-Chair

Holly Snow
2024 Co-Chair

Our expansion into these areas was intentional, rooted in and driven by community need. Throughout the organization we have advocates, including specifically dedicated staff, who work closely with community partners, hearing directly from them about emerging issues and increased legal needs. We review our priorities annually, ensuring we remain responsive to our changing communities and the challenges they face. We work hard so that we can react, respond, and anticipate, partnering with communities, courts, and other advocates, all of which is strengthened by our multi-faceted connections throughout Cook County.

We always have served, and continue to serve, families seeking safety, including from **domestic and sexual violence** and **unsafe housing**. Our commitment to representing children pushed out of school or denied **special education services** is unwavering. We continue to excel at ensuring that those in need receive appropriate **public benefits** and that **homeowners** retain their properties subject to unnecessary foreclosures. Tenants across the county, particularly those who live in public or subsidized housing, continue to seek our services to **prevent unwarranted evictions**. We maintain our service to **low-wage workers**: those who are underpaid, mistreated, or wrongfully terminated. For decades, all of these have been areas of great need, where clients know to come to us for excellent service.



Though our main office location has changed, our roots in the community have not. We continue to be actively present in neighborhoods across Chicago and in suburban Cook County—operating **walk-in clinics** with convenient early evening accessibility and in courthouses where those in or contemplating litigation can seek advice and guidance from an attorney.

While many faces have changed over the years, we are fortunate to have many long-term staff. In both cases, the spirit, intention, and dedication remains the same. Legal Aid Chicago continues to be comprised of hard-working, kind, and smart people who are committed to using their talents to achieve justice for their neighbors.

Over the years, Legal Aid Chicago has evolved and grown, but our commitment to staying true to our roots has never wavered. Today, the organization provides free legal services to over 20,000 individuals and their families annually, helping them navigate the complexities of the legal system and secure their rights, always prioritizing the needs of our community.

This report is brimming with examples of our accomplishments over the past year, showcasing stories of our victories and the remarkable people who made them possible. In the following pages, you will also see that we have highlighted some of our key supporters, partners, and volunteers who have played a crucial role in our success.

Our team at Legal Aid Chicago makes a remarkable difference by providing equal justice to those who could not possibly afford to pay for their services. We are deeply grateful for your interest in learning about our work. If you already support us, we extend our heartfelt gratitude. If you are not yet a supporter, we hope the impact you read about on these pages will inspire you to join us. Your support is essential to our ability to achieve equal justice for all.

We hope you enjoy reading our latest annual report and see that while we have stayed true to our roots, we also look to our future in our latest work and initiatives.



In 2023, we said good bye to John Gallo, our previous CEO and Executive Director:

“Legal Aid Chicago has a remarkable, sustainable culture, where colleagues at different points in their lives, and with a diversity of skills and approaches, work together with shared values to serve clients. During my six years at Legal Aid Chicago, I witnessed tremendous growth within the organization, which enabled Legal Aid Chicago to serve more clients and achieve more favorable outcomes. While the organization nearly doubled in size, the team was able to preserve its special, collaborative culture centered around a team approach.

Kate Shank, Legal Aid Chicago’s new CEO, is now running one of this City’s great law firms, and one of the country’s finest legal-aid organizations. The combination of the variety and quality of the team’s legal work is uniquely exceptional not only in Cook County but across the country.

I am so very proud and honored to have served as Legal Aid Chicago’s Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director for the past six years. I intend to maintain a close affiliation to the organization, and to always be an important part of the Legal Aid Chicago community.”

JOHN N. GALLO

Immediate past CEO and Executive Director

...and we said hello to Kate Shank, our new CEO and Executive Director:


Kate has extensive experience and unwavering dedication to equal justice and access to legal services, which makes her the ideal next leader of Legal Aid Chicago.

Having joined Legal Aid Chicago following her graduation from Northwestern Pritzker School of Law in 2001, Kate has held numerous critical roles including Staff Attorney, Senior Attorney, Supervising Attorney, Director, Deputy Director/ Chief of Staff and Interim Executive Director. Throughout her tenure, Kate has remained strongly connected to our clients and communities, bringing a client-centered approach to her executive leadership. Kate has demonstrated a clear ability to lead, inspire, and foster meaningful change throughout her career.

“I always intended to devote my career to advancing the public good—to use my talents along with the transformative power of the law—to create substantial change for those who might otherwise be denied justice. Joining Legal Aid Chicago fresh out of graduation was a natural step for me. Today, over two decades later, I am just as impassioned, committed, and inspired by our clients, my gifted colleagues, and our mission as I was on day one.”

Kate’s vision harmonizes seamlessly with Legal Aid Chicago’s mission. Her appointment will propel us forward in our commitment to ensuring equitable access to justice for those in need.

KATE officially assumed her role as CEO and Executive Director on November 1, 2023.





SERVING NEW ARRIVALS IN CHICAGO

Staying true to our roots, Legal Aid Chicago's Immigrants & Workers' Rights Practice Group has provided quality legal assistance to Chicago's immigrant community for over four decades. Now, we are assisting newly arrived immigrants (who are often fleeing from abuse and violence in their home country) with their complex legal needs.

Over the last two years, over 45,000 asylum seekers have arrived in Chicago on busses seeking shelter. Their legal needs are complicated, and quite frequently, they lack the financial resources to pay for the legal services they require.

THIS IS WHERE LEGAL AID CHICAGO STEPS IN.

The work of our Immigrants & Workers' Rights Practice Group (IWR) often includes, but is not limited to, helping clients complete and submit the legal documents necessary for lawful residency and employment, including applications for asylum, citizenship, and Temporary Protected Status. IWR also assists clients in applying for U and T visas (which are special visas for immigrant victims of certain crimes or human trafficking). IWR often collaborates with our in-house social work team to provide comprehensive services, ensuring that clients have access to much-needed social services.

In response to the first arrival of busses from the southern border, the IWR team personally met with survivors at shelters, police stations, and hotels where they were housed. This way, we could immediately start explaining the legal process for seeking asylum and provide other information regarding their rights and obligations.



A family reuniting at O'Hare after more than two years apart, thanks for Legal Aid Chicago's IWR Practice Group.

“An asylum seeker needs to file their asylum application within the first year of their arrival to the United States,” says Immigration Supervisor Alix Strunk. “Without direct legal assistance, the immigration legal system is very complicated and even more difficult to navigate for non-English speakers. Many are still suffering from the trauma of the journey and abuses encountered in their home country.”

With the support of our Pro Bono & Community Partnerships team, IWR developed a model for pro se legal clinics designed to provide an accessible and efficient way to help as many people as possible. We now serve up to ten families at each clinic, helping each family to file its asylum applications together. Additionally, clinic participants receive training and materials to equip them to understand their legal process.

Since March 2022, with the support of our partners like Kirkland & Ellis, LLP, Legal Aid Chicago has helped over 700 individuals and their families understand the complicated legal systems and their rights and obligations. For instance, we have helped many apply for asylum, gain access to housing and employment, and start to get back on their feet.

Legal Aid Chicago stands united in providing legal support to those in need, like Nayla and her family (see sidebar), helping to ensure that immigrants in need have access to our quality legal services as a means of rebuilding their lives free from persecution and violence.

Nayla and her family

One recent example is Nayla, an Iranian migrant who was first introduced to Legal Aid Chicago's attorneys in one of the city's shelters for new arrivals.

Nayla originally suffered persecution by Iranian National Guards for “improperly” wearing her hijab. Her family also wanted her to enter into an arranged marriage, which she refused to do. Nayla ultimately married for love, but Nayla's family then persecuted her and her husband.

In order to reach the United States, Nayla and her young son flew to Venezuela. They then traveled partially on foot from there to the southern border of the United States.

Legal Aid Chicago attorneys filed asylum applications for Nayla and her son and helped Nayla's husband get out of detention at the southern border, so he could reunite with Nayla in Chicago. Meanwhile, our immigration team filed a motion to change venue and submitted a separate asylum application for her husband, to ensure that his case can be heard in Chicago along with his family's.

Once Nayla and her husband became eligible for work permits, Legal Aid Chicago helped them obtain employment authorization. Legal Aid Chicago's social work team independently worked with Nayla to secure housing and medical care. In addition, our Education Project consulted with Nayla about issues her son is having at school.

Clearly, every step of the way, Legal Aid Chicago attorneys will be there for Nayla and her family. This will enable them to receive the legal justice they seek, while helping them to become independent in their new, adopted country.

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF THE KATTEN DE DIEGO LEGAL CLINIC

The Katten de Diego Legal Clinic recently celebrated its ten year anniversary. Since its opening, Legal Aid Chicago, volunteer attorneys from Katten Munchin Rosenman LLP (Katten), and law students from Northwestern Pritzker School of Law have served more than 1,200 clients by providing them with legal information, advice, and/or representation on a variety of civil legal issues.



“The Clinic is the crown jewel of Katten’s pro bono program.”

—Jonathan Baum, Katten

Open the third Wednesday of every month, the Clinic operates from the basement of the Jose de Diego Community Academy, a Chicago Public School primarily serving students from Humboldt Park, a community with a high concentration of people with limited income. Jaqueline Menoni, former Principal of Jose de Diego Community Academy, says that the Clinic is “an invaluable tool that has become a staple in the community,” allowing the school to serve as a centralized hub for many community resources. The school also offers clients a safe space to seek help if a civil legal issue arises.

In 2012, Jonathan Baum, Director of Pro Bono Services at Katten, conceived of the idea to offer pro bono legal services from a local school. Jonathan reached out to Legal Aid Chicago and Jose de Diego Community Academy to forge a partnership. After collaboration and planning, Katten de Diego Legal Clinic opened in April 2013 as one of the first pro bono, walk-in legal clinics in the United States that operates from within a school. “The folks at Legal Aid Chicago have been invaluable partners,” says Jonathan. He adds, “The Clinic is the crown jewel of [Katten’s] pro bono program.”

Legal Aid Chicago attorneys and staff are always present when the Clinic is open in order to provide comprehensive support to volunteer attorneys and law students. Legal Aid Chicago lawyers consult with and assist volunteers on each case, utilizing their expertise in issues impacting our client communities. Alyx Pattison, a Legal Aid Chicago Board member, Senior Vice President at Burford Capital, and former Katten partner who helped launch the Clinic, says, “Volunteering at the Clinic is an incredible opportunity for law students and lawyers to gain experience.” In addition, Jared Heck, a Litigation partner at Katten, Vice Chair of Legal Aid Chicago’s Board of Directors, and longtime volunteer at the Clinic, says that this model “helps develop a sense

of camaraderie” as the teams work together to help clients who are understandably often stressed.

A client facing a foreclosure sale on their home, for instance, recently came to the Clinic seeking assistance. She was worried that she would be evicted from her home immediately. After consulting with Legal Aid Chicago, Jared and other volunteers reassured the client that the process of a foreclosure sale would take about six months. She left the clinic that night with a renewed sense of calm, knowing that she had time to get the situation sorted out. Another client in her nineties came to the Clinic, hoping to give her younger sister power of attorney, so that her medical and financial needs would be handled by someone she trusted, if she became unable to make decisions for herself. Legal Aid Chicago staff were able to prepare the documents that she wished to have, as well as notarize them. As Jonathan recounts, “They left that night having accomplished what they wanted, documents in hand.” These examples demonstrate the kind of immediate relief that clients can experience by going to our Clinic.

Numerous clients attend each Clinic seeking similar relief. Matthew Doran, a Senior Litigation paralegal at Katten and member of Legal Aid Chicago’s Ambassadors Board who manages the Clinic volunteers, says that the Clinic has grown to nearly 30 clients each month, and the number of clients attending the clinic continues to increase. Indeed, in a recent month 40 clients attended the clinic, and the Katten and Legal Aid Chicago attorneys kept the Clinic open until after 9 p.m. to make sure every client was served. “The increasing number of walk-in clients shows the critical need to have this service in the community,” says Melissa Bartolomei, Supervisory Attorney in the Pro Bono & Community Partnerships Practice Group at Legal Aid Chicago. “If someone is feeling lost, our doors are open,” says Matthew.



Legal Aid Chicago celebrates the Katten de Diego Legal Clinic and looks forward to many more years helping clients through our fantastic pro bono partnerships with Katten and the Jose de Diego community.

OUR IMPACT

2023 Organizational Statistics

16,400+

Individual legal matters handled (includes brief advice as well as extended representation).

178,800+



Hours of direct case activity logged on individual client cases.

\$22,390

Average financial impact per case with successful financial outcomes.

\$36,944,000

Total financial impact in increased assets, increased income, and decreased debt.



1,100+

Individuals whose health was improved by accessing health and nutrition benefits, including Medicaid, SNAP, etc.

95%+

Overall Case Success Rate

930

People who avoided homelessness by avoiding eviction/foreclosure or obtaining/retaining subsidized housing.



184

Orders of Protection obtained or modified for survivors of sexual and domestic violence/abuse.

419

Clients who received additional support services through Legal Aid Chicago's social work team.

9,580

Individuals reached through community engagement efforts, including legal education, clinics, and more.

Client Demographics

100%
In poverty or otherwise at-risk

65%
Women

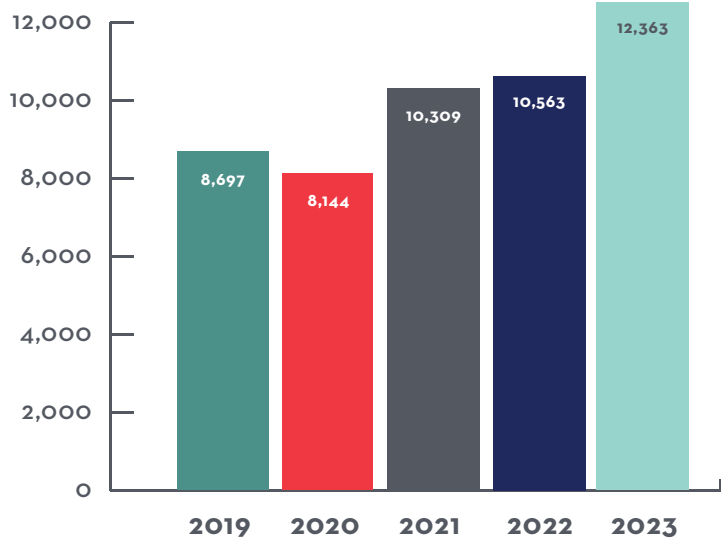
34%
People living with a disability

7%
Clients who received services in a language other than English

18%
Seniors

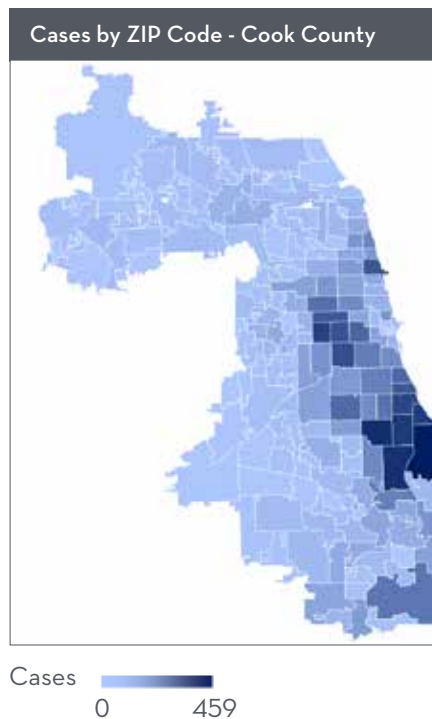
6%
Veterans

CASES OPENED EACH YEAR

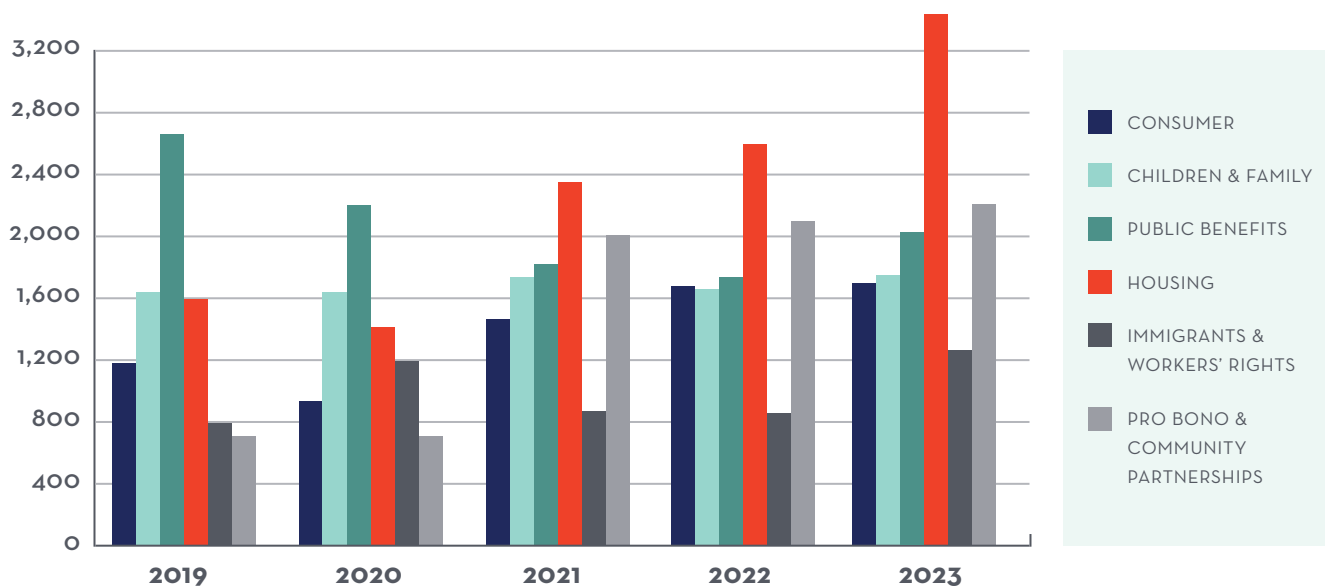


Legal Aid Chicago opened more cases in 2023 than in any of the past five years.

OUR GEOGRAPHIC IMPACT



CASES OPENED BY PRACTICE AREAS EACH YEAR



Case types also shifted in 2023 to reflect our clients' changing legal needs. In particular, housing issues increased dramatically. Our Pro Bono & Community Partnerships group also expanded its work, taking on hundreds of cases related to criminal records expungement/sealing.



**IMMIGRANTS
& WORKERS'
RIGHTS**

HOUSING

CONSUMER

**PUBLIC
BENEFITS**

**LONG-TERM
CARE**

**CHILDREN
& FAMILIES**

**PRO BONO &
COMMUNITY
PARTNERSHIPS**

CHILDREN & FAMILIES PRACTICE GROUP

Protecting vulnerable children and families across Cook County is fundamental to Legal Aid Chicago's mission. In 2023, our Children & Families Practice Group (CFPG) served over 1,500 clients, focusing on cases where the personal safety, family integrity, education access, and financial stability of families were at risk. Our services included:

- ◆ Protective orders for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking;
- ◆ Complex, contested custody and divorce cases, often involving domestic or sexual violence;
- ◆ Child welfare and family defense cases, involving unwarranted Department of Children and Family Services regulation of families;
- ◆ Special education, school discipline, and sexual harassment in school cases.

Client Story

IN JANUARY 2023, Sarah received a terrifying call while at work. An accidental shooting had occurred at her home, and her son Joseph was being rushed to the hospital with non-fatal injuries. Sarah was relieved but understandably shocked, unaware of the presence of a gun in her home.

Upon learning of the incident, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) decided to place Joseph and his siblings in foster care. Despite a lack of evidence that Sarah had put her children at risk, the Court removed the four children from Sarah's care and assigned them a hybrid attorney/Guardian ad Litem (GAL). This one person was appointed to advocate for both their expressed wishes (as their lawyer) and for their best interests (as their GAL).

Sarah's four children, ages 14-17, immediately began struggling emotionally and academically and repeatedly expressed their desire to return home. After Sarah contacted Legal Aid Chicago and we accepted her case, we began devising an innovative

strategy to assist her. We believed that the GAL's dual role, as both attorney and guardian, was untenable. An attorney has a responsibility to zealously advocate for his or her client's wishes, but the GAL refused to listen to the children's repeated requests to return to their mother, instead advocating in court to keep them in foster care.

In May, we filed a novel motion requesting that the court split the GAL/attorney dual role and appoint new client-directed counsel for the children. The judge granted this motion in July. Within a month of receiving a client-directed attorney, the court returned the children to Sarah. The family is now happily reunited. Furthermore, other organizations have begun using our litigation strategy as a model in similar cases to help reunite families across Cook County.

CONSUMER PRACTICE GROUP

The vast majority of our clients are living in poverty or living paycheck-to-paycheck. Our Consumer Practice Group (CPG) seeks to aid at-risk individuals and families by breaking cycles of debt and protecting our clients' income and assets from unfair collections and fraud. In 2023, CPG staff handled over 2,100 cases, securing a total financial benefit of \$16.2 million. CPG provides services in the following areas:

- ◆ Bankruptcy and unfair debt collection;
- ◆ Consumer fraud, payday loans, car titles, and student loans;
- ◆ Foreclosure defense and other protections for homeowners;
- ◆ Maintaining and restoring essential utility services (gas, electric, water);
- ◆ Driver's license restoration for debt-related suspension;
- ◆ Preventing financial exploitation of older adults;
- ◆ Resolving disputes with the IRS at our Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic, including innocent spouse relief and identity theft. (Please see related story on page 24.)

Client Story

MABEL WAS HEARTBROKEN when she lost her husband to COVID in 2021. Soon after, she also contracted COVID and lost her ability to work. Without a steady income, she fell behind on her two mortgage payments and was facing foreclosure. Fortunately, she called Legal Aid Chicago.

Our Consumer Practice Group team reviewed her case and assisted her in filing a Chapter 7 bankruptcy just in time, one day before the auction sale of her home. Though this path would not prevent the sale of her home, it would at least allow for it to be sold at market value, leaving the 65-year-old Mabel with, at minimum, her \$15,000 homestead exemption. However, Mabel's son decided to move in with her, contributing to household expenses, and Mabel's health improved enough for her to return to work part-time. With these changes, she was able to negotiate a loan modification for the first mortgage.



Her Legal Aid Chicago team then converted her Chapter 7 bankruptcy to a Chapter 13 bankruptcy. The Chapter 13 allowed her to make payments on the second mortgage and save her home from foreclosure.

In the end, Mabel was able to save her home and find a path toward a secure financial future. In a text to her lawyer, Mabel said, "Thank you for being a blessing in my life!"

"Thank you for being a blessing in my life!"

—Legal Aid client to her attorney

Client Story

SYLVIA, AGE 50, had lived in her North Side apartment for three years. Due to a disability, she was unable to work, but she had a housing subsidy that covered the majority of her rent. Her home was located near public transit and many other conveniences. It made for an ideal living situation until everything changed one day in 2023.

That day, Sylvia went to her building's mailroom and picked up two packages. Half an hour later, she opened the packages and realized that one belonged to her neighbor. She intended to return it, but before she could, she received a call from her property manager, who asked if she had another tenant's package. She said yes, and the property manager



came to pick it up. Soon after, in an unfortunate turn of events, she received a notice of eviction, stating that she had stolen a package.

An innocent mistake should not be used to evict someone with a disability. When Sylvia called Legal Aid Chicago, our Housing Practice group agreed to take her case and filed a motion to dismiss. After extensive litigation, the landlord agreed to dismiss the case. Sylvia is now living in peace again, safe from the threat of homelessness.

HOUSING PRACTICE GROUP

Each year, thousands of Cook County families experience eviction, housing discrimination, housing insecurity, and a host of other challenges related to housing. Our Housing Practice Group (HPG) seeks to foster a universal right to decent, safe and affordable housing. Last year, HPG staff achieved over 2,500 successful outcomes, prevented hundreds of evictions, protected clients' housing benefits and subsidies, and challenged landlords' discriminatory and retaliatory practices. HPG services include:

- ◆ Preventing evictions;
- ◆ Preventing unwarranted terminations from subsidized housing and voucher programs;
- ◆ Opposing housing discrimination and enforcing tenants' rights under local, state, and federal housing laws;
- ◆ Challenging gender-based housing discrimination;
- ◆ Protecting residents from unlawful lockouts, lease violations, and unsafe living conditions;
- ◆ Advocating for reasonable accommodations for clients with disabilities and protecting the rights of tenants with special legal needs, including survivors of domestic violence.



IMMIGRANTS & WORKERS' RIGHTS PRACTICE GROUP

The Immigrants & Workers' Rights Practice Group (IWR) is committed to serving vulnerable workers, immigrants, and agricultural workers across Cook County and beyond. IWR staff work to protect workers' rights and benefits, obtain protected status for victims of crime, including survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence, and ensure farmworker health, safety, and living conditions. Services include:

- ◆ Securing unemployment benefits and resolving wage claims;
- ◆ Challenging all forms of employment discrimination and enforcing employee protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and other statutes;
- ◆ Representing immigrant victims of crime, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and persecution;
- ◆ Providing comprehensive services for victims of human trafficking throughout Illinois, including victim advocacy before law enforcement agencies and courts;
- ◆ Providing outreach and meeting the legal needs of agricultural workers throughout Illinois.

Please see *Serving New Arrivals in Chicago* on page 6 to learn more about IWR's work in action.

LONG-TERM CARE PRACTICE GROUP

Older adults and individuals with disabilities and special medical needs often require the kind of compassionate living environments offered by long-term care facilities. These residents are often at risk of abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation. Legal Aid Chicago's Long-Term Care Practice Group (LTCPG) supports residents of long-term care facilities and seeks to improve their quality of life through the following services:

- ◆ Redressing deficiencies in residents' quality of care;
- ◆ Preventing involuntary discharge;
- ◆ Resolving disputes with Medicaid;
- ◆ Protecting residents from financial exploitation and elder abuse;
- ◆ Promoting the dignity and personal autonomy of every resident, regardless of age or ability.

Client Story

LOUISE AND HARRY'S LIVES were permanently altered when Harry's daughter Emma visited and took Harry home with her to Wisconsin for a visit. Harry stayed for a couple of days, during which he fell sick and was taken to the hospital. While Harry was ill at the hospital, Emma convinced staff to give her Power of Attorney (POA) over Harry's health care. Once Harry was feeling better, Emma transferred him to a rehabilitation center and presented the POA paperwork to have Harry declared incompetent. Louise tried to visit, but without proof of their marriage she was denied. She returned with proof of their marriage, but during her visit there was an altercation with Emma and the papers mysteriously disappeared. Louise was then escorted out by security and asked not to return. Emma abandoned Harry at the facility soon after.

Louise contacted an Ombudsman paralegal at Legal Aid Chicago, who immediately drove to the rehabilitation center and met with Harry.

He confirmed what happened and emphatically expressed his desire to return home to his wife.

Louise's Ombudsman attempted to reach Emma, but she refused to return the calls. The Ombudsman tried to convey the severity of the situation to the facility's administrator to have Emma's Power of Attorney revoked, but the administrator would only listen to Emma directly. The Ombudsman then called law enforcement, the Illinois Department of Health, other elderly protection agencies for help. Nothing seemed to work and Harry remained trapped in the facility.

Refusing to give up, Louise's Ombudsman finally reached the nursing home's attorney and explained the situation, sending him proof of Louise and Harry's marriage. The attorney immediately realized that the facility was incorrect and stated that Harry should be released to Louise that afternoon. After a happy reunion, Harry delightedly returned home with Louise.

PUBLIC BENEFITS PRACTICE GROUP

Legal Aid Chicago is proud to provide comprehensive civil legal assistance across a vast array of legal issues. One of our most complex and multi-faceted categories of legal assistance involves public benefits. In 2023, Legal Aid Chicago’s Public Benefits Practice Group (PBPG) handled over 2,600 cases, helping families across Cook County meet their basic human needs through the following programs and services:

- ◆ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP);
- ◆ Medical Assistance (Medicaid, Medicare, Medicare Savings Programs);
- ◆ Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security;
- ◆ Veterans Benefits;
- ◆ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF);
- ◆ AABD Cash (Aid for the Aged, Blind, Disabled);
- ◆ Cash, Medical, and Food Assistance for Non-Citizen Victims of Trafficking, Torture, and Other Serious Crimes (VTTC);
- ◆ Crime Victims Compensation from the State of Illinois.



Client Story

OUR PBPG ATTORNEYS and paralegals assist when the Social Security Administration (SSA) appears to have made an incorrect finding. One client, Andre, came to Legal Aid Chicago after SSA claimed he needed to return almost \$100K in overpaid Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits.

Over 15 years ago, Andre was diagnosed with severe bipolar disorder and soon started receiving Social Security benefits to help pay monthly bills. However,

despite his disability, he still wanted to work. So, in 2018, Andre was happy when he secured a part-time job at a grocery store.

For five years, this situation worked well. But it all changed suddenly last year, when SSA decided that Andre had been earning too much and was no longer disabled. SSA also claimed that they had overpaid him more than \$91K, due to his employment.

After talking to Andre, an attorney at Legal Aid Chicago knew that something wasn’t right. He reviewed Andre’s employment records and obtained a statement from Andre’s supervisor describing special assistance provided to Andre at his job, including extra support, shorter hours, and more frequent breaks than other staff. Our attorney argued that Social Security incorrectly terminated Andre’s benefits because his position was “subsidized” under SSA’s rules. In the end, SSA agreed. SSA reversed its decision, restored Andre’s full monthly benefits, and removed the overpayment from his record.

Client Story

AT LEGAL AID CHICAGO, our attorneys work hard to ensure that our clients' voices are heard in the courtroom and that they feel listened to and empowered throughout their case. In 2023, Harold had a court date related to his request to seal his criminal record. In preparation, Harold and his attorney compiled over 50 pages of evidence demonstrating his worthy character, including his resume, letters of recommendation, an anti-bullying class curriculum he created, and sermons that he gave at his church. Harold's lawyer sent those documents to the court for the judge to review beforehand.

On his court date, Harold waited hours for his case to be called. Finally in front of the judge, Harold and his attorney were told the court did not have Harold's documents. Harold was understandably confused by the error, but Legal Aid Chicago attorneys are prepared for all types of situations. The judge directed the question about whether to proceed to Harold's



attorney, but his attorney made sure that it was Harold who was able to make the decision.

In the chaos of the court room, Harold's attorney explained the two options: proceed or request a later court date. His attorney wanted Harold to have ownership over his case and make the decision for himself, while understanding his options. Harold decided he wanted the judge to see the documents, and was assigned a new date accordingly. Later that week, **Harold called his attorney and expressed his appreciation: "After court, I turned to my wife and said, 'That's why I love my legal aid lawyer!'"** Once Harold was able to fully present his case to a judge who had reviewed the additional information, his sealing petition was granted, giving him the opportunity to move forward without being held back by his criminal record.

PRO BONO & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS PRACTICE GROUP

Legal Aid Chicago's Pro Bono & Community Partnerships Practice Group (PCG) facilitates collaborations with dedicated volunteers and organizational partners. These connections help expand our reach and amplify our impact across Cook County. PCG manages over twenty volunteer-based projects, including:

- ◆ Adult and juvenile criminal record relief (expungements, sealing and related relief);
- ◆ Large-scale virtual and in-person legal clinics in neighborhoods across Cook County; and
- ◆ Preparing advance directive documents for clients so that they can prepare for the future and have peace of mind.

PCG also oversees Legal Aid Chicago's community engagement work through building and maintaining relationships with a broad spectrum of community partners to benefit our clients and the community at large.



THE COZZOLA FUND AT LEGAL AID CHICAGO

Legal Aid Chicago has a new fund to assist our current clients with emergency needs! It is named the Cozzola Fund in honor of Rich Cozzola, who was a beloved, long-time attorney at Legal Aid who suddenly passed away in 2022.

The Fund is made possible primarily by an anonymous donor and others who know of the challenging needs our clients can face and wanted us to be able to assist them with one-time, small emergency grants. Grants from the Cozzola Fund do not need to be repaid by our clients.

Staff nominate current clients with emergency issues who have no other options, where a small grant can make an incredible difference. A multi-faceted approval process ensures the grants are being used to directly help clients and will make an immediate and critical difference in their lives.

*Here is an example of a recent request to the **COZZOLA FUND** for an emergency grant, which was approved:*

I am placing a request on behalf of Abbas and his family for a \$450 grant from the Cozzola Fund.


Abbas requires this request to assist with moving out of his current home and into a new apartment. This is especially important right now, as Abbas has no current work authorization to obtain a source of income to fund this move and was requested by his landlord to move out of the property by September 1, 2023.

Abbas and his family are clients of Legal Aid Chicago as human trafficking and domestic violence survivors who obtained our legal assistance for their Immigration case. Abbas, his wife, and three year-old son have no social

support. Language is a barrier for them to advocate for themselves and/or to inquire any support, as Farsi is not a language that many social service agencies can interpret.

Legal Aid Chicago has attempted to call other organizations to potentially fund this move, with no success. After calling various moving companies, we have been able to get a quote from a very low cost moving company. Their services are estimated to range from \$405-\$450.

Because the family have less than a week to move out and do not have any other means to obtain financial support for this transition, we kindly send this request on behalf of Abbas and his family.



It is easy to “remember” Legal Aid Chicago in your estate plans!

**There are many ways to include Legal Aid Chicago
in your estate plan, like designating us:**

- ✓ a specific dollar amount named in your will,
- ✓ a percentage of your estate described in your trust,
- ✓ as a beneficiary of your retirement account, a donor advised fund, and/or a life insurance policy.

If you would like any more information about doing so, OR
have already remembered us in your estate plan, please contact:

Jen Miller, Chief External Relations Officer
jemiller@legalaidchicago.org
(312) 347-8381

**Our staff, our clients, and their families cannot
thank you enough for remembering us!**





DONOR SPOTLIGHT

John and Yvonne Held

John and Yvonne Held have been married for 65 years. They met when they were in college at Purdue and have been at each other's sides ever since.

After Purdue, John attended Georgetown Law School while Yvonne worked as a nurse in D.C. She recalls, "The day JFK was shot, I was working in the hospital adjacent to the Naval Hospital that received JFK's body. This is a day I will always remember."

John became a patent attorney and practiced in Minneapolis and then Chicago. Interestingly, he was involved with an infringement of the patent for the very first digital computer, the ENIAC computer (it was not Apple!). Yvonne was with him every step of the way, working as a nurse and helping to raise their three daughters.

When the Hells moved to Chicago, John commuted via train to his firm in the loop and visited with Sheldon Roodman on the train. (Sheldon was Legal Aid Chicago's first Executive Director.) They would chat about Legal Aid Chicago, the incredible work it does, and John was very intrigued. As John started to think about retiring, Sheldon mentioned to him he may want to volunteer with Legal Aid Chicago in one of its neighborhood offices.

As John moved toward full retirement, he started volunteering a few times a week

John volunteered for Legal Aid Chicago for nearly twenty years. One day, Yvonne mentioned to him that she would like to volunteer too. Yvonne then became involved in the Legal Aid's Ombudsman Program, where she visited nursing homes in Cook County to check on the residents and staff. Since she had a long-time career as a nurse, this was a perfect fit for Yvonne.

While Covid put a stop to John and Yvonne's in-person volunteer work with Legal Aid, they remain engaged and follow Legal Aid's latest initiatives closely. **"We are so pleased to see how Legal Aid Chicago has changed over time, while staying true to its roots,"** John states.

Impressively, John and Yvonne have been Legal Aid donors for thirty years, since 1992. "We give every year to Legal Aid," says John, "and we give because we know first-hand

"Giving back is better when we do it together"

at Legal Aid Chicago's North Suburban neighborhood office in Evanston. He worked with Bill Kolen there, who became his mentor and friend. (Bill headed Legal Aid's Public Benefits Practice Group and later became the Supervising Attorney for the Legal Aid's North Suburban Office.) **"I loved meeting and helping clients,"** John says. **"They would come in with civil legal challenges, and we would help them navigate the justice system. It was all life-changing for me."**

how effective Legal Aid Chicago's staff is in helping its clients."

"Best of all, Legal Aid Chicago has provided us with a meaningful way for us to give back, while helping to change its clients' lives in extraordinary ways—all the while doing it together!" declares Yvonne, looking at John and smiling.





VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

KAREN LOBL

Legal Aid Chicago could not do its critical work without the help of its incredible volunteer attorneys! ♦ Karen Lobl has been volunteering with Legal Aid Chicago since 2017, after retiring from a storied career in the private sector, specifically in the tax field, during which she worked in law firms, CPA firms, and corporate settings, among others. She is both a lawyer and a CPA, and fortunately was recommended to us by the Chicago Bar Foundation.

Initially, Karen was contributing to the ongoing Advance Directive and Property Transfers (ADAPT) project at Legal Aid, where she helped clients prepare and execute Power of Attorney documents, Living Wills, and Transfer on Death Instruments. While doing this work, staff learned of Karen's comprehensive tax background and started consulting her about tax questions arising from their clients' other civil legal issues, like divorce or foreclosure.

"I was surprised to learn that Legal Aid Chicago did not have a Low Income Tax Clinic (LITC) once I saw the need," Karen says. A Low Income Tax Clinic is a free clinic that assists low income clients who have

tax disputes with the Internal Revenue Service, including audits, appeals, and tax collection matters.

She thus planted a seed that created Legal Aid Chicago's first-ever LITC, which is now housed in the Consumer Practice Group (CPG). Karen also helped us write and apply for a grant from the IRS for the LITC, which we still have today. Not surprisingly, she even wrote a lot of the application the first time around since it's (not surprisingly) very tax-focused.

Now in its fourth year of operations, Karen has dedicated more than 1,600 volunteer hours for the LITC, assisting hundreds of clients along the way.



“It has been wonderful to see its growth,” she says with pride, adding that “the Clinic interacts a lot with other Legal Aid practice groups, allowing us to provide holistic legal services to vulnerable populations.”

When Karen reviews an LITC case, she takes the pieces of a client’s tax history and sees a story. “When I look at the history of the client’s case, it helps me build a close relationship with that client, seeing the outline of their story,” Karen reflects. These stories can lead to tax resolutions through processes like offers in compromise, which allow taxpayers to settle tax debt for less than the full amount owed. Offers in compromise can clear very large tax debts, giving a client the opportunity to pay a minimal amount.

“A client may feel embarrassed at first when they have a large tax debt, but we provide a way for them to tell their story and explain to the IRS how the issue arose. This can then help clear the debt. It becomes a tremendous relief for clients,”

Karen explains. With Karen’s help, Legal Aid Chicago’s LITC has relieved nearly \$250,000 in tax liabilities, penalties, and interest in the four years of its operations.

Karen loves working with Legal Aid Chicago staff to provide LITC services. “I love the culture here. People are so committed to the work,” she emphasizes. “I see every day how Legal Aid staff are highly supportive of one another, and share their knowledge, allowing others to learn from them. I love working with other advocates here,” she adds.

Karen’s colleagues in the LITC share her enthusiasm. Eric Sternberg, Staff Attorney in the LITC, says that Karen is not only good at “complex tax matters and preparing tax returns” but is also incredibly kind-hearted, patient, and caring. “She goes above and beyond to help Legal Aid Chicago’s clients,” Eric adds. James Brady, Supervisory Attorney, agrees that “without her involvement, we would not have been able to start or continue our Low Income Taxpayer Clinic.”

Thank you, Karen, for your countless hours of dedicated service over the years. You and the other volunteer attorneys help make a tremendous difference in the lives of Legal Aid Chicago’s clients and staff, and we are grateful for all of your contributions!

OUR 2023 DONORS

We regret we cannot list every donor, but we extend our sincere thanks to each and every one! (This list reflects cumulative gifts of \$1,000 and more received between January 1, 2023 and December 30, 2023.)

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The Chicago Bar Foundation
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“There were moments when I wanted to give up, feeling that I had nothing to win. Thankfully, Legal Aid Chicago reinforced that I had a case that was winnable and that they were not going to give up until we won.”

—VERONICA GONZALEZ, LEGAL AID BOARD TREASURER AND FORMER CLIENT



LIFETIME DONORS

\$1,000,000+

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FINANCIALS

Statement of Activities for the Year Ended

December 31, 2023

REVENUE

Grants and Contributions - LSC	\$	8,649,509
Grants and Contributions - Other Government		11,394,544
Foundations, Fellowships, and Other		2,046,851
Contributions		2,404,561
Special Events		107,076
Less: Cost of Direct Benefit to Donors		(114,396)
Special Events, Net		(7,320)
Cy Pres Awards		136,772
Attorney's Fees		72,313
Investment Return (Loss), Net		735,429
Miscellaneous		262,780
Services, In-Kind		2,924,512

Total Revenue	\$	28,619,951
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EXPENSES

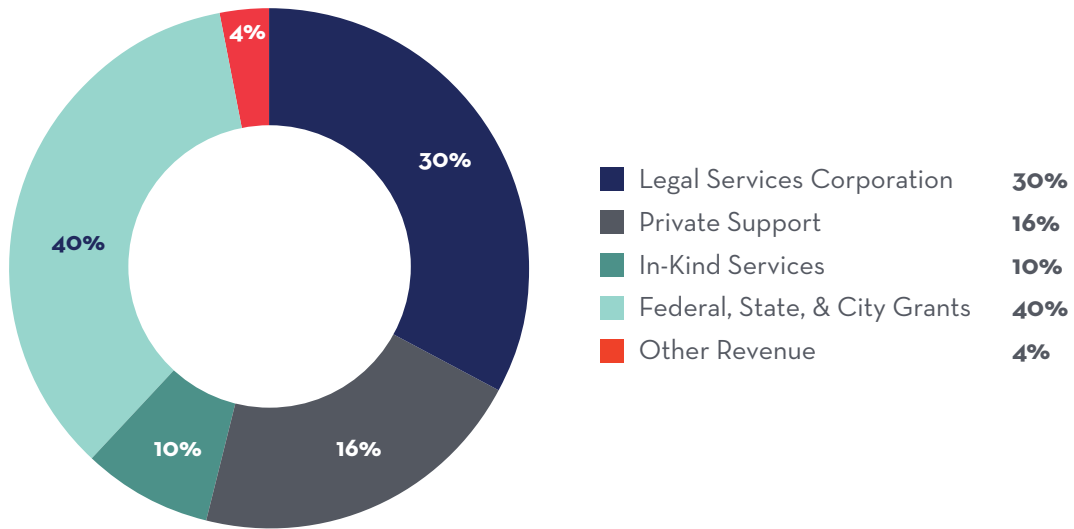
Program Services	\$	23,451,529
General and Administration		3,496,928
Fundraising		1,046,436

Total Expenses	\$	27,994,893
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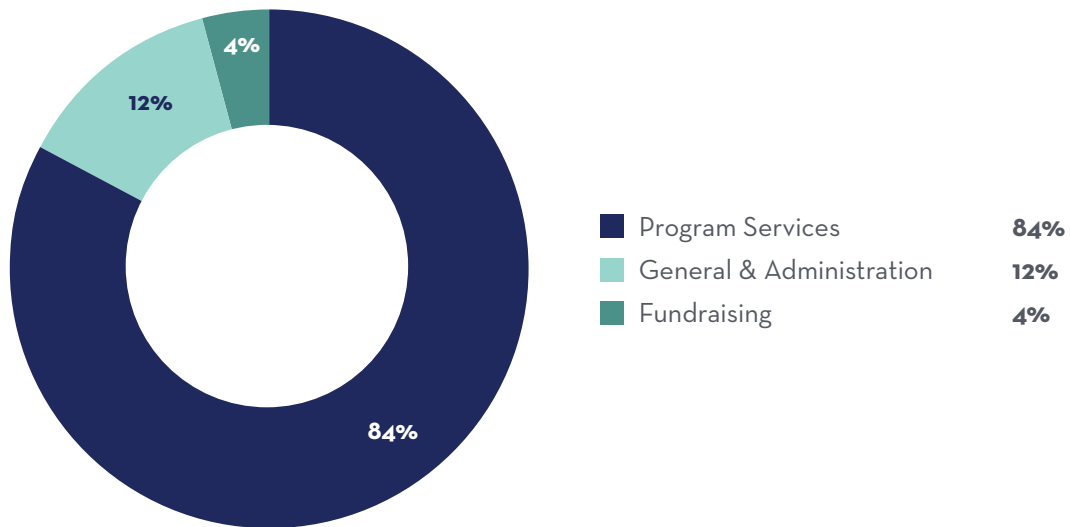
CHANGE IN NET ASSETS	\$	625,058
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Net Assets - Beginning of Year		9,269,403
Net Assets - End of Year		9,894,461

2023 TOTAL REVENUE



2023 TOTAL EXPENSES



FINANCIALS

Statement of Financial Position

as of December 31, 2022 and December 31, 2023

ASSETS	2023	2022
CURRENT ASSETS		
Cash and Cash Equivalents	\$ 1,726,198	\$ 2,319,781
Restricted Cash - Client Deposits	1,070,210	397,866
Restricted Cash - Letter of Credit Deposit	500,000	500,000
Grants and Contributions Receivable	3,342,011	3,058,021
Miscellaneous Receivable	257,850	231,230
Due from Affiliate	28,428	—
Prepaid Expenses	619,269	553,656
Investments	2,857,913	2,605,107
Total Current Assets	\$ 10,401,879	\$ 9,665,661
NONCURRENT ASSETS		
Investments	\$ 2,976,895	\$ 2,701,464
Property and Equipment:		
Computer Equipment and Software	285,709	285,709
Furniture and Equipment	790,157	790,157
Leasehold Improvements	3,269,328	3,269,328
Total	4,345,194	4,345,194
Less: Accumulated Depreciation	(3,659,107)	(3,408,214)
Property and Equipment, Net	686,087	936,980
Total Noncurrent Assets	3,662,982	3,638,444
Operating Right-of-Use Asset	3,601,717	4,747,266
Total Assets	\$ 17,666,578	\$ 18,051,371

Statement of Financial Position

as of December 31, 2022 and December 31, 2023

LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	2023	2022
CURRENT LIABILITIES		
Fringe Benefits and Payroll Withholdings	\$ 145,920	\$104,492
Accounts Payable	108,825	153,497
Grants Payable	49,937	174,216
Deferred Revenue	135,993	178,180
Current Lease Liability - Operating	1,712,142	1,661,155
Accrued Vacation Expense	895,307	732,828
Due to Affiliate	—	13,807
Client Deposits	1,070,210	397,866
Total Current Liabilities	\$ 4,118,334	\$3,416,041
NONCURRENT LIABILITIES		
Long-Term Lease Liability - Operating	3,653,783	5,365,926
Total Liabilities	\$ 7,772,117	\$8,781,967
NET ASSETS		
Without Donor Restrictions:		
Undesignated	\$ 6,526,750	\$6,150,712
Board-Designated Endowment	2,876,895	2,601,464
Total Without Donor Restrictions	9,403,645	8,752,176
With Donor Restrictions	490,816	517,228
Total Net Assets	9,894,461	9,269,404
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 17,666,578	\$18,051,371

AMBASSADORS BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

ZACK KELSEY AND BRENT NICHOLSON

Legal Aid Chicago's Ambassadors Board (AB) represents a dynamic group of individuals from a variety of professions who are passionate about equal justice for all. As co-chairs of the AB's Event Committee, longtime members Zack Kelsey and Brent Nicholson are instrumental in planning the AB's signature fundraising event, Justice Is Served.

All proceeds from this event support Legal Aid Chicago's mission to provide high-quality civil legal aid to Cook County's most vulnerable populations.

Coordinating Justice Is Served requires exceptional organization and cultivation

skills, and after four years as co-chairs, Zack and Brent have it down to a science. However, their service on our Ambassadors Board and efforts to make an impact on our clients date back even further.

Zack has served on the AB for over 14 years.

"Once you attend your first Annual Luncheon at Legal Aid Chicago, hear the stories, and meet the staff and fellow volunteers, you learn of all the work and what goes into serving clients," said Zack. "The return you get on volunteering a little bit of your time to help plan our annual fundraiser makes it very rewarding."

In 2017, Brent Nicholson, a former colleague of Zack's, attended Justice Is Served as one of Zack's guests. Brent joined the Ambassadors Board

the following year. "At first, the passionate AB members are what drew me in. Talk to anyone at Legal Aid Chicago, and their passion for helping the vulnerable people in Chicago is infectious," said Brent. "Listening to client stories made me understand how great the need for free legal assistance is in our city, and I wanted to join Legal

Aid Chicago in helping individuals in Cook County who need it most."

Together, Brent and Zack have served as co-chairs of the Justice Is Served Committee for four years and counting. "My hope is that the AB continues to

grow and all members become engaged with the organization. With an actively engaged team of 70+ members, what a difference it could make to Legal Aid Chicago," said Brent. "I will continue to do my part and help get the members engaged with events like Justice Is Served."

"Our goal for the Ambassadors Board is to support Legal Aid Chicago, support everything that they are doing, and build on the community we've created with our fellow AB members," Zack added.

Zack Kelsey is a Director in the Disputes, Claims, & Investigations Group at Stout and Brent Nicholson is a Director at Novo Advisors.



AMBASSADORS BOARD



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Emily Fiore - Ernst & Young LLP

Haleigh Mulhern - Haffner Law

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Benjamin Haskin - Aronberg

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Kelley Smith - FisherBroyles LLP

JUSTICE IS SERVED

COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Zachary (Zach) Kelsey - The Claro
Group, A Stout Business

Brent Nicholson - Novo Advisors

Interested in joining the Ambassadors Board? Learn more at:

<https://legalaidchicago.org/get-involved/join-ambassadors-board/>

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Teresa A. Sullivan	Deputy Director & General Counsel
Dennericka Brooks	Managing Director
Benna Crawford	Managing Director
Vivian Hessel	Chief Information Officer
Mark Kennedy	Chief Financial Officer
Jennifer E. Miller	Chief External Relations Officer
Cynthia Sadkin	Chief Strategy Officer
McKenzie Marks	Director, Human Resources



Several Legal Aid Chicago staff members pose to help spread awareness about sexual assault month (in April) by wearing denim for Denim Day.

LEGAL AID CHICAGO STAFF ANNIVERSARIES

The following staff represent long-standing members of our community who recently celebrated anniversaries with us.

30+ Years

Irma Amaro
James Brady
Denise Davis
Mary Ellen Diaz

Shelia Fernandez
Vivian Hessel
Kate McCartin
Amanda Palacios

Lisa Palumbo
Cynthia Sadkin
Virginia Sandoval

20+ Years

Erica Adams
Sherice Austin
Colleen Connolly
Ana Franco
Pedro Gaytan

Mona Green
Miriam Hallbauer
Jessica Kalmewicki
Dan Lindsey
Beverly Nunnally

Kate Shank
Piper Taggart
Feliciano Torres
Michelle Weinberg

15+ Years

Kulsum Ameji
Dennericka Brooks

Ashley Fretthold
Yolanda Madrigal

Justine Rodriguez
Lawrence Wagner

10+ Years

Jeanette Chico
Suzanne Courtheoux
Benna Crawford
Talissa Guerrero

Derek Koshinski
Denise Macon
Ainat Margalit
Desiree Mathews-Plonowski

Peter Mural
Iffat Perveen
Shirley Wilkins

5+ Years

Karel Cohan
Trey Daly
Mischa Fleishman
Nykia Fuller
Marisol Guadarrama
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IN OUR OWN WORDS

We asked a cross-section of our incredible staff why they work at Legal Aid Chicago and what makes them feel like they are making a difference. Here are some of their responses.



**Karel
COHAN**

IT Service Desk Analyst

"I appreciate how Legal Aid Chicago facilitates clients helping themselves, and I love seeing the immediate impact of our work. That is why I enjoy helping our staff to use technology effectively and efficiently, so that they can focus on our clients."



**Bianca
VALLEJO**

Human Resources Generalist

"The best part of my job is coordinating in-person gatherings, where all staff are together, especially after working remote for so long. Seeing everyone together brings a smile to my face."



**Anna
MAITLAND**

Supervisory Attorney,
Immigrants & Workers' Rights
Practice Group

Anna is a leader in Legal Aid Chicago's Trafficking Survivors Assistance Project (TSAP).

"I wish people could see the complexity and nuance of our cases. Although our clients experience true hardship, we get to see them change their own lives for the better with our legal assistance."



**Sarah
KIRK**

Comptroller

"The best part of my job is the people. Everyone at Legal Aid Chicago is so smart and driven and here for the right reasons. When I meet new coworkers, they are always interesting, kind, and most importantly, good people."

IN OUR OWN WORDS



**Melissa
STAAS**

Associate Director of
the Children & Families
Practice Group

Melissa is a devoted advocate for families that are under threat of separation from the Department of Family Services (DCFS).

“Legal Aid Chicago provides top-notch and creative litigation while representing our clients. We build relationships with partner organizations, both legal and community-based, as well as with the judiciary and local government leaders who are tasked with representing our clients.”



**Contessa
GIBSON WILLIAMS**

Senior Paralegal,
Public Benefits
Practice Group

Contessa is now attending University of Illinois Chicago College of Law where she is obtaining her law degree.

“What initially piqued my interest in the law was the ability to give clients a voice, and spread awareness about injustice. Since I have been working at Legal Aid Chicago, I am shifting how I can help. Ultimately, I want to know how we can fix the system, so people do not end up in difficult situations in the first place.”



**Luceli
HERNANDEZ MENA**

Senior Paralegal,
Immigrants & Workers’ Rights
Practice Group

“I love my clients and my team. I feel like I’ve found my calling. I feel like I was meant to be in this kind of immigration work right now.”



**Samuel
REESE**

Supervisory Attorney,
Public Benefits
Practice Group

In our Veterans’ Rights Project, Sam works to connect disabled veterans with public benefits.

“Poverty can be dehumanizing. Unfortunately, many people experiencing poverty often feel embarrassed, guilty, and isolated. I love being able to connect with clients on a human level. I try to help them navigate difficult legal situations while keeping a positive outlook.”

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OUR MISSION

At Legal Aid Chicago, we work together to provide high quality civil legal aid to people living in poverty and other vulnerable groups. Through advocacy, education, collaboration, and litigation we empower individuals, protect fundamental rights, strengthen communities, create opportunities, and achieve justice. In carrying out our mission, we treat everyone with compassion and respect.

OUR VISION

It is our vision that poverty will not be an impediment to justice in Cook County. Legal barriers that perpetuate poverty and inequality will be dismantled. Laws and legal systems will be open and equally effective for all who need their protection, especially those who experience unfair and disproportionately unjust treatment due to personal or community characteristics.

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Staying True to Our
Roots

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