

# **SANCTUARY FOR FAMILIES**

2022-2023

# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

From April 2022–March 2023, the IOLA Fund of the State of New York provided critical support to Sanctuary for Families’ Center for Battered Women’s Legal Services (“the Legal Center”) in its delivery of holistic, integrated civil legal services benefiting 3,422 low-income and indigent victims of domestic violence, sex and labor trafficking (a 12% increase over last year, and other forms of gender-based violence, with a total of 4,551 cases closed (9% increase over last year).

The Legal Center provides assistance to abuse victims in all five counties of NYC (Bronx, Kings, New York, Queens, and Richmond) as well as surrounding counties in New York State. Clients are among the metro region’s poorest residents—last year, over 90% living well below the poverty line. In total, 91% were people of color (13% Asian, 50% Hispanic, 27% Black, 10% Asian, 2% Middle Eastern, 2% Multiracial) and 67% of adult clients are immigrants, hailing from more than 130 countries, many of them monolingual or with limited English skills—the largest numbers being from Mexico, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Jamaica, and China. A significant majority (95%) of clients live in New York City, including the Bronx (32%), Brooklyn (25%), Queens (21%), Manhattan (16%), and Staten Island (2%). The majority are single parents with dependent children.

The Legal Center maintained its strong relationship with major law firms engaged in public interest pro bono work, with 59 major firms working with Legal Center staff (30% more than last year). Of the aforementioned closed cases, 33 law firms handled 133 family law cases; 15 firms handled 56 trafficking cases; 16 firms handled 72 immigration cases; and 5 firms handled 5 matrimonial, public benefits, and housing



**Population Served:** Low Income Women and Families

**Total Funding:** \$11,335,337

**Total IOLA Grant:** \$275,000

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**

- Total Staff: 92.6
- Paralegals: 22.6
- Lawyers: 52.2
- Other: 17.8

cases. In addition, the Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP) trained 383 advocates—including law students and non-admitted law firm associates—who assisted 178 litigants in Family Court.

The Legal Center’s family and matrimonial legal team helped clients obtain hundreds of thousands of dollars through successful litigation of child support, maintenance/spousal support, and equitable distribution of assets in divorces, as well as many successful enforcement actions. Legal staff also assisted 80 clients in obtaining their rightful public entitlements as well as housing subsidies after erroneous claim denials, reductions, and/or missed payments—including many thousands of dollars in retroactive benefits in cases where errors were identified. Many immigrant clients were assisted in securing public benefits, including advocacy where public assistance (PA) authorities erroneously denied eligible immigrants, and ensuring that benefits were applied for and secured after an eligible immigration status was achieved. Lastly, the intensive advocacy of legal staff helped numerous clients to avoid eviction through settlement of arrears (e.g. an April 2022 negotiated settlement of \$2,000 against a rent claim of \$40,829).

## DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES: CASES

### *Family/Matrimonial*

On March 21, 2023, a Sanctuary matrimonial attorney obtained a favorable divorce settlement for Ashley on the day trial was to commence. Ashley had suffered years of verbal, emotional, and physical abuse by her husband, with whom she had been in a relationship since 2001 and married in 2006. Their one child was born in 2003. In addition to physical abuse, Ashley’s husband would demand sex multiple times a day, and if she did not comply, he would yell at or beat their son, wake him up demanding that he tell his mother to have sex, or accuse her of infidelity, call neighbors and friends to complain, or lock her and her son out of the apartment. During the marriage, the parties purchased a

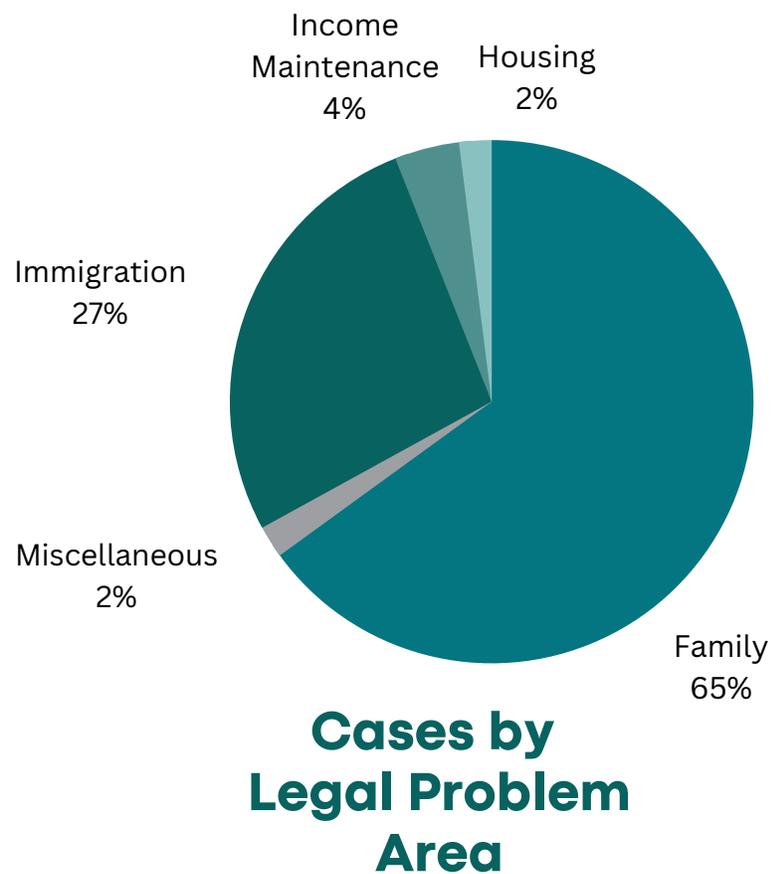
**4,828**  
people  
benefitted from  
**4,551**  
legal cases  
closed

heavily-subsidized co-op apartment in the Bronx. Ashley and her son continued to live there after her husband was arrested and excluded by a temporary order of protection for physically attacking her. Around that time, he stopped paying the mortgage, which was solely in his name. In 2019, a judge ordered him to bring the mortgage current within days and sign releases so that Ashley could communicate with the mortgage lender to bring the co-op out of foreclosure. A final order of child support was also issued around that time, but Ashley’s husband routinely failed to pay the full amount and made no progress toward the \$11,000 of retroactive support, allowing arrears to increase to nearly \$15,000 by 2023.

In Fall 2022, Ashley’s Sanctuary attorney filed a motion seeking to hold her husband in contempt for failing to abide by these two orders. Under threat of incarceration, he finally agreed to a reasonable settlement, which, among other things, required him to pay Ashley \$20,000 as a distributive award within 60 days as well as an additional \$25,000 incrementally via the Support Collection Unit. In addition, Ashley received sole title to the co-op; kept \$17,000 in marital savings under her name; was released from responsibility for marital debt other than the mortgage; received her share of her husband’s pension as well as 50% of the sale price of the marital real property in Jamaica, estimated to be worth approximately \$36,000. The court conducted an inquest and granted the divorce.

**Immigration**

In July 2022, a senior immigration attorney secured a T visa for Maria, a trafficking visa applicant who had been sexually assaulted at the border by a Customs & Border Patrol agent who promised her freedom in exchange for sex. Maria’s T visa application was denied in October 2020, and the attorney along with a team of pro bono attorneys from Sullivan & Cromwell submitted an appeal brief before the AAO. In its decision, the AAO recognized that Maria was in fact a sex trafficking victim and remanded her case to USCIS director for him to take a decision consistent with AAO’s analysis. Thanks to the staff attorney’s tireless, effective work arguing the merits of



the T visa application, the USCIS director reversed the prior decision, determining that Maria’s application satisfies the other requirements for the T application. This decision represents dramatic reversal of fortune for her life here in the U.S. Maria had been living for several years in a church, seeking sanctuary from deportation by ICE. The BIA denied her two motions to reopen by prior counsel, and more recently the 5th Circuit denied her appeal of that decision to reopen her prior removal order. With this grant of T visa status, Maria will finally be able to reopen and rescind the old removal order, live in the U.S. without the threat of deportation constantly looming, obtain employment authorization, and achieve stability in her life.

## OTHER SERVICES: OVERVIEW

The Legal Center provides a range of other legal-related services including family law and immigration screenings, legal advice and referrals, translation/interpretation, pro se assistance, and legal and non-legal case management. The goal is to ensure the most holistic, integrated services for abuse victims who often have multiple pressing legal needs. In addition, the Legal Center delivers extensive community legal education and “know your rights” sessions for abuse victims and potential victims, with the goal of increasing access to services for marginalized, often isolated communities.

During the report year, Sanctuary Family Justice Center (FJC)-based legal staff provided civil and immigration legal screenings for thousands of victims, providing clients with risk assessment, safety planning, and helping them to make informed legal choices that often resulted in decisions not to pursue litigation, reducing the number of pro se litigants and matters in the courts. FJC family law attorneys handled unprecedented screening volume, while simultaneously working through their

**5,493**  
people  
benefitted  
from Services  
Other Than  
Direct Legal  
Services

long-term caseloads. Additionally, the Director of the Legal Center's Brooklyn FJC covers intake in the Kings County Integrated Domestic Violence Court. The family law attorneys in our main office also help with FJC screenings, spending 2-3 days every month doing legal consultations.

## **OTHER SERVICES: TECHNOLOGY**

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In the past several years, Sanctuary has streamlined, standardized, and digitized intake procedures to ensure that the full range of client needs and risks—both immediate and long-term—are uniformly assessed during intake, and appropriate referrals to other programs and departments can be made at that time. Other developments include further digitization of processes to increase accessibility, and support communication across staff and departments working remotely. These include digitization of Sanctuary's emergency client grants system, which has facilitated faster, more efficient financial assistance to clients in need for expenses including rent, utility bills, moving costs, and medical expenses.

Cybersecurity is an increasingly critical concern, all the more so for a nonprofit agency responsible for securely storing sensitive, often highly confidential clinical, legal, and contact information on thousands of survivors of domestic violence and trafficking and at-risk children. Salesforce, remote desktop, and other methods of remote access are protected by two-factor authentication to prevent unauthorized access to our systems even if a password is compromised. Staff are trained on how to spot phishing attacks, and our security systems are audited annually.

## **OTHER SERVICES: TRAININGS**

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Legal Center staff receive a wide range of trainings, including those conducted at monthly all-staff Town Halls, as well as technical legal trainings during its own monthly department-wide meetings. Each month, staff members present an area of law that they practice, highlight case successes, and occasionally outside speakers are recruited to present to the entire Legal staff. Significant trainings last year have included a monthly training series provided by Legal Directors and Deputy Directors to provide more junior attorneys with a deeper family law foundation, with trainings on orders of protection, custody and visitation, OP trials, evidence, intersection with custody cases, retaliatory OPs/amended petitions, and electronic evidence and ethics. In October-November 2022, Lindsey Song, Deputy Director of the Courtroom Advocates Project gave a 2-part training to all staff on the increasing dangers and

manifestations of technology-facilitated abuse. Trainings target staff at all levels, whether cross-trainings for attorneys in other practice areas, or introductory legal trainings for attorneys, case managers, paralegals and other staff. Legal staff also have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of external trainings, for example trainings organized by the Office of Court Administration, the NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, the ABA Commission on Domestic & Sexual Violence, and the Practising Law Institute.

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## PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

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**The Pro Se Asylum Project:** Launched as a pilot with the law firm of Latham & Watkins in Summer 2022, this project matches pro bono attorneys and legal interns with asylum seekers to assist them in completing their Application for Asylum (Form I-589); file the application; complete an affidavit draft in support of their case; and prepare country condition reporting within a 9-week timeframe in order to ensure a timely filing. The immigration legal staff team screens immigrant clients to confirm their eligibility for asylum, the strength and straightforward nature of their asylum case, and their interest in working with this pro se model rather than receiving full representation. Five asylum seekers, all of whom identify as LGBTQ+ and who were interested in this limited form of assistance, were accepted for the pilot, identified because they are likely to have the best chance of achieving successful outcomes with limited pro se assistance. The program plans to run subsequent asylum clinics in the year ahead with Latham and other law firms.

Other Pro Bono highlights include the work accomplished by the honorees at the annual Above & Beyond Awards, held in November 2022. Eleven firms were honored, including Epstein Becker & Green for assisting a client with her ERAP housing application, successfully waiving arrears of over \$40,000 and allowing the client to remain in her housing; Latham & Watkins for organizing the Asylum Pro Se clinic described above; Morvillo Abramowitz and Paul, Weiss for their extraordinary representation of a client in a challenging Hague Convention case that ultimately went before the Supreme Court and secured a unanimous favorable ruling; and Stroock for their representation in a custody modification and order of protection case that allowed a client and her child to relocate and permanently suspend visitation with the abuser.

**Law Students:** The Legal Center has extensive engagement with law students, including the long-standing Courtroom Advocates Project, which trains hundreds of students from 12 metro NYC law schools as well as unadmitted associates from 12 participating firms to assist pro se petitioners seeking orders of protection in family court. The Uncontested Divorce Project trained 24 law students from 5 law schools to handle these cases. Additionally, a Financial Support Enforcement Externship at Columbia Law School trains a dynamic group of law students, who go on to prepare support enforcement motions to be filed in the Supreme Court, as well as drafting motions and petitions for cases currently being litigated in Family Court.

**Pro Bono Portal:** Pro Bono Director Nicole Fidler is constantly seeking to expand and improve the Pro Bono Portal—a major source of training and support for Sanctuary pro bono attorneys. Most recently, the law firm Covington & Burling helped update the country condition reports on the asylum section of the Portal, ensuring that we have the most up-to-date information for our immigration pro bono partners.



**965 Attorneys volunteered 57,865 hours**

**234 Law Students volunteered 1,070 hours**

**39 Other Volunteers volunteered 4,792 hours**

Each  icon is equal to 123.8 volunteers.

Attorneys are represented through the Green Figure.

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

# SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

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The Legal Center actively participates in and co-chairs the Lawyers Committee against Domestic Violence (LCADV), a coalition of lawyers from public and private bars who work with abuse victims and join forces to sensitize the legal system to their needs. Staff attorneys participate in the LCADV's Judges Working Groups in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, and take the lead on organizing its annual Fordham Law School Conference to improve the court system's response to domestic violence. The Legal Center also continued to convene and chair monthly meetings of the NYS Anti-Trafficking (NYSATC), over 140 organizations working together to improve the State's response to human trafficking. Legal Center attorneys continue to be active members of many Bar Committees, including the Women's Bar Association's Domestic Violence Committee, Judiciary Committee, and Family and Matrimonial Law Committee; Association of the Bar of the City of New York's Domestic Violence Committee; the NYC Bar Association's Pro Bono & Legal Services Committee; Association of the Bar of NY's Animal Law Committee; and the Bronx Bar Association's Family and Matrimonial Law Committee.

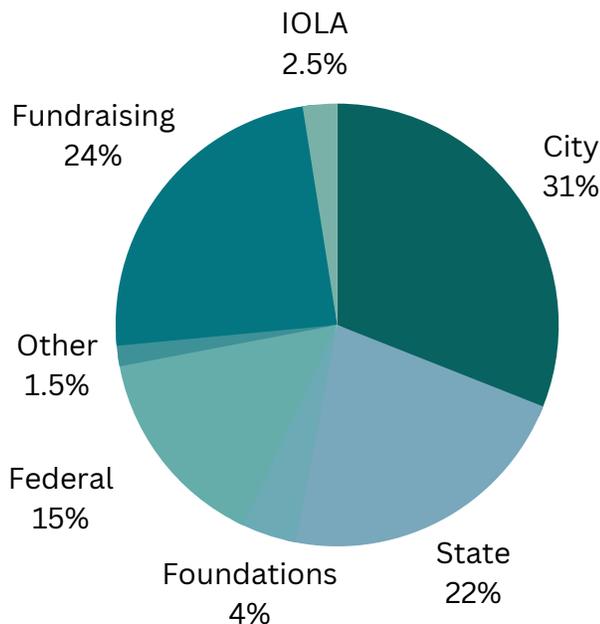
Members of our Legal Center co-chair the citywide Cyber Sexual Abuse Task Force, created in mid-2016 by Sanctuary staff in collaboration with civil attorney Carrie Goldberg and others. The Task Force includes representatives from government, nonprofit agencies, and independent civil attorneys, including the Mayor's Office to End Domestic & Gender Based Violence, DayOne, Legal Momentum, Legal Services NYC and others. The Task Force continues to grow and meets at least quarterly. The Task Force ran a conference in April 2022 entitled, "Speaking Out Online: Perspectives from Survivors, Researchers, and Lawyers." The conference discussed the increasing threats of defamation and lawsuits faced by gender-based violence survivors who disclose their abuse online. The conference included three panels from legal experts, researchers, and survivor activists to determine how survivors and their advocates can navigate these obstacles together. Approximately 100 public interest attorneys, students, advocates, and survivors attended.

**Family Law Conference:** In 2021, Jennifer Friedman, Sanctuary's Director of the Bronx and Manhattan Legal Project & Policy, spearheaded the Family Law Roundtable, a group of major domestic violence service providers including Sanctuary, the New York Legal Assistance Group, Safe Horizon, and Her Justice, hosted by leading international law firm Proskauer Rose, which has met monthly since Ms. Friedman first convened it. The Roundtable has focused on topics involving the biased treatment of and negative outcomes for domestic violence survivors in custody/visitation cases, including misogyny, parental alienation/friendly parent, the proposed Kyra's Law,

proposed legislation on coercive control and lack of lethality indicators as family offenses, and the impact of clients’ intersectional identities on outcomes. Discussions identified significant challenges faced by abuse survivors in family court, and potential solutions to these problems which may include judicial oversight mechanisms, training judges and other court actors, court reform/additional resources for courts, changes to judicial selection process and substantive law changes. Following a late 2021 report summarizing its conclusions regarding the failures of a family court system rife with bias and injustice, a 2-day hybrid [family law conference](#), “Justice for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: Transforming an Inequitable Family Law System” was held in October 2022, featuring 8 panels led by family law practitioners, researchers, judges, and survivors—with an audience of over 750 in-person and virtual attendees. Sessions included How Bias Manifests in Family Court; Judicial Selection, Oversight and Training; Parental Alienation; Coercive Control, Lethality and Femicide; Vicarious Trauma; and Court Reform. The panels were an opportunity to examine the significant challenges for survivors in family law cases, learn about key legal developments, engage and collaborate with practitioners and advocates across organizations, and develop meaningful solutions.

## SOURCES OF FUNDING

Sanctuary for Families' Legal Center received  
**\$11,335,337**  
 in total funding this past year



Foundations	\$430,988
IOLA Grant	\$275,000
City and County	\$3,542,566
Federal	\$1,729,597
State Funding	\$2,536,985
Fundraising	\$2,752,817
Other	\$67,384
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$11,335,337</b>