The Bronx Defenders

Overview of Achievements, 2020-2021

During this reporting period, The Bronx Defenders’ Civil Action Practice continued to provide comprehensive civil legal services and community education to low-income families in Bronx County. We closed 4,216 civil legal services cases, and quickly expanded our capacity to work with clients virtually through the use of technology.

Highlights of these cases include:

- 171 families, encompassing 435 family members, remained in their homes and avoided eviction
- 126 clients maintained their jobs and licenses, benefitting 145 family members.
- 42 families, encompassing 90 family members, obtained stable, affordable housing.
- 18 families encompassing more than 55 family members, stayed together because we successfully secured immigration benefits.

Other highlights

Covid & transition to remote services, use of Microsoft Teams & streamlined information management: we quickly adapted to remote work by connecting remotely via teams and other platforms but also by building out our civil intranet, creating materials regarding changing laws, rights and procedures during Covid and also created an internal resource bank to support advocates and seamless access to sample litigation, letters and other guides.

Developed response teams to both build on our core areas of civil expertise-in housing justice, property seizure, police accountability, benefits and employment and created specialized roles to build our expertise, including a Counsel on Employment & Occupational Strategies to support our clients around worker’s rights, access to unemployment and reentry support.

Population Served: Low Income Populations

Area Served: Bronx County

Total Funding: $2,372,024

Total IOLA Grant: $225,000

Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 40.00
- Lawyers: 24.00
- Paralegals: 15.00
- Other: 1.00
Janet, who was fighting against her Article 10 case in Family Court and was also a former Criminal defense client, also faced termination of her housing choice section 8 housing subsidy for her alleged violation of “not moving into her transfer apartment.” This was truly an unjust termination while at the same time her new landlord was illegally and fraudulently enriched. Our civil attorney, working hand in hand with our client, challenged this termination on due process and other grounds and represented Janice in a remote-telephonic-hearing and won on all grounds. Together they successfully argued the many reasons, inclusive of due process as well as other substantive grounds, why the charges could not be sustained and why the termination proceeding should be dismissed. Janice now has stable and affordable housing.

Ahmed, an Uber Driver, faced immediate suspension of his Taxi Limousine Commission (“TLC) license on an arrest related to the alleged “assault” of a TLC officer. The reality was that the conduct was a misunderstanding but because this was an officer of TLC, our client was subject to arrest and suspension. It did not matter that he was an essential worker during the pandemic supporting access to food and travel for those in need, or that this suspension affected his immediate family or the family members (20 of them) that he is supporting in his mother country. Two of our civil attorneys were able to challenge this suspension and successfully achieved reinstatement of Assad’s license through aggressive advocacy and negotiations with the City and a request for a due process hearing and prevented revocation of his license, which would have caused long-term financial hardship.
Other Services...

### Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114,313 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community legal Education</td>
<td>1,940 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>850 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Assistance</td>
<td>111,523 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Overview

Our community education and outreach aims to help community members understand their rights, the available resources, and which types of problems might benefit from legal services. Through active outreach and education, we equip community members with knowledge that can help them avoid legal issues altogether, and assist them in understanding what type of help to seek when legal issues arise. This has been especially true during the pandemic. We provide community legal education through direct workshops, outreach at our community events, and printed and online materials that help people navigate the legal system more effectively. This outreach draws upon what we learn from clients, highlighting areas where we see common civil legal needs, such as property retrieval and housing issues. Equipped with this information, community members can often avoid legal issues altogether. When a legal issue does arise, they are better equipped to navigate it and to seek out advocacy where needed. For instance, clients who understand the property retrieval process can attempt to navigate it on their own and reach out to a civil legal advocate if they need support tackling an unusual obstacle.

Our services include support for pro se representation where we are unable to take on a client’s case. In particular, we provide resources for pro se representation to walk-in clients via our community intake team and disseminate pro se information and materials through outreach and clinics. While working remotely, we are providing these materials online. We have developed a robust internal resource bank for sharing information, helping all advocates connect quickly with the answers and documents they need to support their clients.

Beyond providing community members with legal information, we engage them in organizing and provide the tools and resources they need to build collective power for change. Over the past few years, we’ve built upon our existing connections with the Bronx community and our longstanding commitment to learn from our clients to build a new approach to community organizing. Recognizing that those closest to the justice system are best positioned both to identify problems and to spearhead solutions, we have begun to organize former clients, their families and community members to mobilize for change. Our Director of Community Organizing is an experienced organizer from the Bronx who has experienced the justice system firsthand, and she has used her perspective and expertise to build community power among Bronx residents.

### Examples

Working with private civil rights attorneys, the National Lawyers Guild and other public defenders, we trained over 125 people regarding police accountability and strategies to protect our clients’ rights and fight against related civil rights violations. We also created a know your rights factsheet and worked collaboratively with our criminal and impact litigation practices to support Bronx residents who experience police violence during protests.

This year, we expanded our use of social media to provide information to clients and community members through infographics and live presentations. Key civil legal services information shared included informational posts on the notice of claim process, property retrieval, and changes in housing court. This social media outreach reached thousands of people and over 500 people engaged with these posts.

We held our second annual policy summit, which brought together community members and former clients to learn about the BxD policy agenda and learn how to get engaged.
Significant Collaborations

To support clients in navigating the complex challenges they face, we collaborate with a wide range of partner organizations. We refer clients to community-based organizations that can provide services beyond what we offer, from food pantries to inpatient substance abuse treatment centers. As subject matter experts in a range of complex and intersecting issues, we provide crucial information to fellow advocates and directly to the community - as when we partner with tenant groups, schools, and faith communities to provide trainings on navigating police interactions or understanding immigration law. Our partners also frequently refer clients to us, deepening the connections we have with other community based organizations. And we collaborate with these partners to look beyond individual clients and pursue larger systemic change on issues such as bail reform and equity in the child welfare system.

Over the past year, we have continued to strengthen existing partnerships and develop new ones. We continued to work closely with the Coalition of Reentry Advocates (CORA) to participate in statewide policy advocacy efforts around reentry. As a partner in the LEAP Legal Advocacy Partnership, we are committed to collaborative work and diversity as well as innovation in organizational models, delivery systems, and methodology, and we recognize the need to maintain community-based service delivery. We co-founded Bronx Solidarity! a coalition of over 12 tenant legal services organizations in the Bronx and tackled racism and incivility head on in Bronx Housing Court and also participate in the NYC All County tenant coalition. We also organized a city-wide coalition of advocates who practice at the Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings (OATH) and host the listserv for advocates, mostly focused on strategies around defending TLC Licensed Drivers. We also organized a recently organized coalition of city wide advocates related to supportive housing and strategies to support tenants who have mental health impairments living in supportive housing settings. We are members of the Right to Counsel Coalition, supporters of Housing Justice for all and members of the Fair Chance for Housing coalition to both share strategies, share resources and also to fight for broader policy and other change on behalf of our clients.

We create, organize and participate in these partnerships and coalitions to learn from our peers, to cross refer issues, to build opportunities for collective advocacy and to avoid duplication of efforts.
The Bronx Defenders.

At the beginning of this year, we transitioned to remote working and implemented technological solutions to allow staff to continue to work with their clients without meeting in person. Improvement in technology has allowed staff to work with clients remotely. This includes access to Microsoft teams and other platforms, use of Adobe Acrobat, use of communication services for feedback, like padlet, transitioning our server to SharePoint, etc. Additionally, our expansion of our practice intranet has also dramatically improved our ability to share resources and provide training to staff members while working remotely.

Trainings

The Bronx Defenders provides substantive ongoing training to all staff. All new attorneys and advocates receive extensive training as part of our “training team” model. This begins with an intensive multi-week orientation and training program which includes classroom (now virtual) lectures focused on substantive knowledge and skills development. Whether new to the practice or beginning with years of experience, one on one training is customized to the staff member’s experience level. In addition to these trainings, new staff are paired with current staff and mentors to shadow cases and clients. Staff then begin to work on cases under the careful supervision of their supervisors. All supervisors are required to attend trainings provided by the Management Center, focused on effective supervision and race, equity, and inclusion within the context of management. Additionally, the majority of our CAP leadership team have attended the Housing Justice Leadership Institute, a 10 session institute on management, leadership and supervision techniques, strategies and philosophies.

This year, the civil action practice developed a civil training curriculum for new staff and current staff, focusing on the core substantive areas and skills necessary to develop within the first year, which included simulations integrated into the substantive trainings. We also avail ourselves of external trainings through LEAP, the City Bar, PLI, and other resources. Our professional development fund covers costs for external trainings and City Bar memberships.

Beyond these practice-specific trainings, staff often attend voluntary trainings offered by colleagues in other practice areas in order to further develop their interdisciplinary skills. Internal trainings include anti-oppression trainings led or coordinated by our Equity & Institutional Transformation team and trainings led by Dr. Maya Prabhu on mental health issues. Staff frequently attend trainings outside of BxD, supported by $1500 of annual professional development funds offered to each staff member.

These external trainings allow for Continuing Legal Education credits for attorneys as well as attendance at conferences. In recent years, we sent two emerging non-attorney leaders in our practice to the Shriver Center Leadership Institute. Staff have also attended and presented at conferences by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association and the New York State Bar Association.

When New York went on pause and we transitioned into remote working, we created a CAP virtual training and learning lab, where the practice held weekly trainings and roundtables on the most pressing issues of practice including litigating illegal lockout actions, understanding pandemic and other income benefits, understanding the NYS Budget and opportunities to advocate for policy reform, integrating social work into civil practice and how to work remotely and provide client-centered services, among other topics. Additionally, we increased our investment in technological access to tools and information by developing an internal practice specific intranet with the latest online trainings, collaborative documents that track law changes and updates. Lastly, the Managing Director initiated annual professional development check-ins with each member in the practice, consisting of 30 minute conversations to discuss further professional development opportunities.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

Leveraging our partnerships with law firms on innovative and high-impact cases, our full-time Director of Pro Bono, a former CAP attorney, continues to help firms develop their in-house expertise in various aspects of social justice-related legal work (such as housing, immigration, benefits, and civil forfeiture) by providing similar sets of cases to each firm. With a reputation for matching high-quality attorneys with cases in which they can make a real difference for the clients and community we serve, we currently partner with 243 pro bono attorneys on 57 active civil case matters. To build on this success, we have created pro bono projects that offer our partners an opportunity to focus on specific types of cases, such as police misconduct or removal defense. The process of placing cases and planning these projects helps us turn our partners’ existing skills and interests into meaningful outcomes for our clients. Attorneys from Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and Affiliates (Skadden) work alongside advocates from The Bronx Defenders to conduct intakes of clients who have been mistreated by the police. Skadden lawyers perform these intakes at Bronx Defenders’ monthly clinics and meet with clients outside of those clinics as the need arises. We worked with 45 attorneys and paralegals from Skadden through this partnership during this reporting period, with many attending multiple clinics and deepening their expertise in the Notice of Claim process. In addition to pro bono volunteers from law firms, we host a small number of volunteer interns throughout the year. This year we significantly continued to work with law student volunteers from Brooklyn Law School, NYU Law School, and Fordham Law School to review and correct RAP sheets. These students learn about the criminal record review and correction process as well as the broader work of reentry advocacy.

Pro Bono Statistics

Attorneys: 301 Volunteers 600 Hours
Law Students: 10 Volunteers 760 Hours
Other Volunteers: 4 Volunteers 200 Hours

Sources Of Funding

Iola Grant: $225,000
Foundations: $641,711
State Funding: $543,391
Other: $961,922
Total: $2,372,024