Empire Justice Center

Overview of Achievements, 2020-2021

Our mission is to make the law work for all New Yorkers, especially for those who need its protection most. We are a respected systems change agent helping low-income and marginalized people, with a focus on engaging in high impact litigation; advocacy; training, support and technical assistance to the legal services community; and high quality legal assistance, especially for those unable to be served by other programs, particularly immigrants in the Hudson Valley and on Long Island. We utilize all available legal tools to work for racial and economic justice, with an emphasis on changing the systems within which poor people live. Our 2020-21 work benefited hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, securing new legal protections, obtaining unprecedented multi-year funding for foreclosure prevention services, securing full restoration of funding for the Disability Advocacy Program (DAP), and handling individual cases that returned more than $4.3 million in back awards and settlements, $61,414 in ongoing monthly benefits, $8,442 in monthly payments avoided and $347,734 in lump sum awards and settlements avoided. In addition to our impact work, we closed 2,018 direct service cases during the 2020-21 reporting period, directly benefiting 4,135 people. The work of our disability advocacy program returned $355,329 to the state in interim assistance. Through Project Uplift, we connected over 240 families with over $124,000 to lift people in Monroe County out of poverty by covering basic expenses – for example, paying for a car repair that enables a person to get to their workplace. We have also made great strides in the expansion of our Language Access Program in Monroe County, building relationships in the community, delivering technical assistance and training and providing leadership to the Monroe County Language Access Coalition.

Population Served: Low Income Population
Area Served: Statewide
Total Funding: $ 8,341,001

Total IOLA Grant: $945,000

Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 63.74
- Lawyers: 30.39
- Paralegals: 13.00
- Other: 20.35
Our client is a Nassau County mother, a domestic violence survivor with 4 children, whose landlord had turned off the water and electricity several months prior because she was unable to pay her rent. After the tenant and an advocate were repeatedly refused help by the police, we contacted the police commissioner, explained that this was a Class A misdemeanor, and sent him the NY State Attorney General's directive to law enforcement on illegal evictions. The utilities were turned back on within 24 hours after a sergeant intervened. As a result of this interaction, we have set up a training for the Nassau County Police Department on illegal evictions.

Our client is a 12-year-old wheelchair user in Monroe County. She was initially denied approval from Medicaid for a power standing wheelchair, so we requested a fair hearing. These durable medical equipment (or DME) appeals can be tricky to win. Standing chairs are particularly expensive and the arguments for/against can be very technical. Armed with strong supporting letters from multiple medical providers, we kept the focus squarely on our client, her medical needs and the difference this chair would make to her daily life and growing independence. We received a favorable decision and the client is now in possession of a top of the range power standing wheelchair which will fit her for the rest of her life.
Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>493,941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>15,728</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>32,629</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Assistance</td>
<td>445,584</td>
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In our efforts to improve legal protections and services for those in need, Empire Justice Center undertakes policy analysis, conducts targeted research and engages in systemic advocacy aimed at improving the administration of justice and strengthening the legal rights of people in New York State who are living on low incomes or are otherwise disenfranchised. During the end of this reporting period, New York State saw unprecedented disruption in all aspects of daily life caused by the Covid-19 crisis, including halting the 2020 legislative session after April 2.

- Similar to previous years, Empire Justice Center worked on a wide range of issues affecting low-income people, focusing on the impact of the Pandemic. Three examples include leading multiple funding campaigns on a range of legal service programs for low-income New Yorkers from housing instability to public benefits; leading a campaign to ensure access to accurate identity documents necessary in many areas of life for transgender and non-binary New Yorkers; and passing a bill in both chambers that would fix New York’s broken part-time unemployment insurance system.

- As with our past efforts, policy advocacy is at its strongest when organizations come together for a common goal. During this reporting period, Empire Justice Center joined others in the following efforts:
  - Organized and participated in over 80 meetings with key policymakers in 15 areas affecting low-income people;
  - Weighed in on over 40 individual pieces of legislation affecting low-income people, from shelter housing to domestic violence;
  - Commented on at least three additional proposed rules, regulations or bills at all state and federal levels;
  - Produced two detailed reports on public benefits and childcare affecting very low-income people;
  - Testified at five Joint Legislative Hearings on civil legal aid, the foreclosure crisis, and eight areas of poverty law;
  - Signed on to at least 50 letters impacting low-income New Yorkers from social security disability to healthcare;
  - Authored alone or with others at least eight pieces of op-eds on a wide range of areas including foreclosure, aid during the pandemic and civil legal aid.
  - Conducted several training sessions about the legislative process for at least 50 advocates for low-income New Yorkers.

Other Legal Related Services: Overview
**Companion Piece to National Report: Redlining and Neighborhood Health** Empire Justice Center contributed a local perspective to a national report from the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC). The report, “Redlining and Neighborhood Health” and our companion piece, “COVID-19 Disparities in Rochester, NY: The Legacy Of Redlining In The City Of Frederick Douglass And Susan B. Anthony,” analyzes data to show the relationship between racially based segregation and health in Black and Brown communities. Both nationally and locally, COVID-19 cases and deaths are disproportionately hitting Black and Latinx people and redlined neighborhoods, and we propose this is directly linked to redlining - there are higher instances of poor health in historically redlined neighborhoods, which heighten the risk of morbidity in COVID-19 patients. We also propose systemic solutions, including:

- federal, state and local policies to stabilize tenants and homeowners in neighborhoods with high rates of COVID-19;
- a living wage that reflects the true cost of housing, childcare, health care and higher education;
- and fair lending testing of all financial products, with enforcement and monetary consequences for financial institutions that discriminate against Black and Brown communities.

**Substantive Legal Trainings/ Task Forces** - Advocates across the state look to Empire Justice for substantive legal training, more so now than ever before, as they navigate COVID-19’s impact on an ever-changing legal landscape, and our unique legal services model has enabled us to quickly identify and respond to needs as they emerge. Trainings are built into nearly all our substantive legal programs, and we provide cutting-edge information and support focusing on a variety of legal issues for community organizations and nonprofit advocates. During the 2020-21 IOLA grant year our staff delivered 115 trainings and Task Force meetings across the state, reaching 6,942 participants, issuing 628 CLEs.
Trainings

Empire Justice invests in the professional development of our staff, sending them to numerous state and national conferences and local and regional trainings. Because of COVID-19, many conferences were made available remotely and at a reduced cost, creating opportunity for more staff to benefit. Over 90% of our staff attended professional development trainings/sessions, including virtual conferences held by the National Consumer Law Center, Shriver Center, National Crime Victims Law Institute, National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives, National Community Reinvestment Coalition, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, SOMOS Inc., UnidasUS, New York State Office of Victim Services, and bar associations. At the Board level, we conducted two orientation sessions for new members. During the 1st quarter of their first term in 2021, new members were provided training on the legal and fiduciary responsibilities of nonprofit boards. A second session provides new board members with an orientation to the history and work of Empire Justice Center. These two sessions ensure that all board members are not only grounded in their responsibilities but also in the work of the organization.

As an organization, Empire Justice continues to invest time and resources in diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA). Our internal DEIA Workgroup meets regularly and helps shape our internal training calendar and agenda. Through lessons learned via the Racial Equity and Justice Initiative (REJI), a community-wide initiative in Rochester that seeks to address racism by focusing on organizational change and building community capacity for racial equity, we are in the process of updating our internal policies to move the organization’s equity goals forward. We also began working with an independent consulting firm to assess organizational needs and help inform our next steps following the retirement of our VP for Diversity, Inclusion and HR.

Technology

During the 2020-21 grant period, we migrated our staff to Office 365. We have trained staff on and encouraged the use of Microsoft Teams, enabling widespread use of video conferencing between staff and with external colleagues and clients. We continue to use Zoom to produce Know Your Rights style trainings, and recently upgraded our licenses to include closed captioning and integrated ASL interpretation. At the end of 2020, we officially transitioned to SalsaEngage for our marketing platform, and will be transitioning from Salesforce to SalsaCRM for our database in 2021. These innovative tools have already strengthened our communications, messaging and branding, and enabled us to easily track constituent engagements, promoting targeted outreach.

Funding from IOLA allowed us to make major organizational technology infrastructure improvements. We replaced our outdated servers in our Rochester and Albany offices, including our backup servers. We upgraded to Sophos, giving us endpoint virus protection for all computers/servers with enhanced protections from ransomware/malware attacks, and replaced our firewalls and wireless routers.
Other Services

Significant Collaborations

We continue to work collaboratively on many fronts. We subcontract with several of our legal services partners to provide services to crime victims, SSI recipients, those facing foreclosure and issues accessing health care. We partner with Pro Bono Net and the Center for Human Services Research at SUNY Albany to provide outreach, training and information through the Crime Victims Legal Network (crimevictimshelpny.org). We join with other legal services agencies to undertake significant litigation, including the Center for Law and Economic Justice. As mentioned above, the Monroe County Language Access Coalition brings together the courts, legal services providers, uti agencies, funders and County government to address issues relating to Limited English Proficient individuals in accessing courts and government benefits and services, and is expanding to include financial institutions. In partnership with the other legal services providers in Rochester, we launched the Tenant Defense Project to protect the rights of tenants in Monroe County, addressing eviction prevention in a holistic and meaningful way that is unique in New York State. Empire Justice will develop litigation strategies and advocacy support to address any systemic issues that arise.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

CASH is a community coalition led by Empire Justice Center that helps working families with low-to-medium incomes build stronger financial futures and increase their incomes through the Earned Income Tax Credit. Trained volunteers assist in preparing and filing tax returns free of charge, helping clients open bank accounts and purchase Savings Bonds. Volunteers also provide information on predatory lenders so those who receive significant refunds do not fall prey to these predatory practices. In collaboration with the United Way and City of Rochester, we received a multi-year federal grant through the Office of Minority Health to utilize our tax and health expertise to decrease adverse childhood experiences and apply the knowledge gained through the Earned Income Tax Credit among service providers to increase knowledge in the community, resulting in more financial stability among underserved populations claiming EITC. Due to COVID-19, the tax season has been extended through May 15th, 2021. However, during the 2020 tax season so far, 90 C.A.S.H. volunteers donated 3,383 volunteer hours to provide services for over 1,100 households who claimed $2,916,039 million in Federal and NY State tax refunds and credits. Law Students/ Volunteer Interns – This past year we had a total 17 law student interns and student volunteers. We involve law students in many aspects of our work, particularly through the local law schools – Albany, Touro, and Pace. Interns have the opportunity to conduct intakes for a number of potential clients on a wide variety of issues, conduct outreach, FOIL data, and update the Fair Hearing Bank for which they review, summarize, redact, scan and post. Each office generally has between two and six volunteers/interns working on research and policy projects at any given time, however COVID-19 has led to a reduction in volunteers and interns overall, and especially within our CASH program. Attorneys Emeritus Program – We are an approved AE host organization. We were host to four Attorneys Emeritus during the reporting period – three out of our Albany office and one out of our office on Long Island – who contributed 278.25 hours to legal work at Empire Justice. Pro Bono Attorneys – We often partner with private attorneys who act as co-counsel on cases. We also worked with 1 attorney this year on internal policy. During the 2020-21 grant period, 12 attorneys provided 443.73 hours.

Pro Bono Statistics

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<td>Attorneys</td>
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<td>443.73</td>
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<td>Law Students</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>3,500.35</td>
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Sources Of Funding

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