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. In partnership with subcontractor JustCause, our 2021-22 work benefited hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers despite the ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, securing new legal protections, obtaining historic multi-year funding for foreclosure prevention services which appeared in the Governor’s initial budget for the first time, securing an increase in funding for the Disability Advocacy Program (DAP), and handling individual cases that returned more than $8.4 million in back awards and settlements, $44,092 in ongoing monthly benefits, $10,234 in monthly payments avoided and $1,181,532 in lump sum awards and settlements avoided. The work of our DAP program returned $497,484 to the state in interim assistance during the reporting period. In addition to our impact work, we closed 2,079 direct service cases during the 2021-22 reporting period, directly benefiting 3,805 people. Through Project Uplift, we connected 37 families with over $18,000 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 Justice Program in Monroe County, building relationships in the community, delivering technical assistance and training, including the creation of a Language Access Plan for the Police Accountability Board, and providing leadership to the Monroe County Language Access Coalition.

Population Served: Low Income Populations

Area Served: Statewide

Total IOLA Grant: $946,799

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:
- Total Staff: 66.27
- Lawyers: 31.87
- Paralegals: 11
- Other: 23.4
Immigration:
Our client is an 11-year-old boy from El Salvador. Our attorney worked on his behalf to apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile status to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, and his case had been pending before a Nassau County Family Court judge for nearly one year. As a result of our fierce advocacy, the Court finally issued orders that allowed the child, who fled El Salvador with his mother in 2018 because she was attacked after being a witness to an MS-13 killing, to move forward with his life in the United States.

Income Maintenance:
Our client is a 33-year-old whose case came up for a Continuing Disability Review (CDR) just before the COVID-19 shut down. Due to the client’s mental health issues, the client refused the telephone or video hearing options, which would mean a long wait until the agency resumed in-person hearings. Our advocate worked hard to obtain a good Medical Source Statement from the treating therapist, which was submitted along with supporting mental evidence, and we were able to secure the client’s ongoing benefits.

3,805 people benefitted from 2,079 legal cases closed

Cases by Legal Problem Area

- Housing: 26%
- Health: 13%
- Education: 2%
- Employment: 14%
- Family: 7%
- Income: 18%
- Individual Rights: 4%
- Immigration: 9%
- Miscellaneous: 5%
- Consumer: 2%
Other Services: Overview

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 continued disruption in all aspects of daily life caused by the Covid-19 crisis, including shutting down the State Capitol, preventing in-person meetings, advocacy and lobby days.

Similar to previous years, we worked on a wide range of issues affecting low-income people, focusing on the impact of the pandemic. This reporting period, our work led directly to the end of welfare mortgage liens in New York State, which prevented all families who receive public benefits from building generational wealth and financial stability. Empire Justice Center public benefits attorneys drafted half a dozen versions of the repeal, negotiated and consulted with the state legislature, and the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Because putting an end to welfare liens has been a decades-long priority, it is hard to overstate the importance of this accomplishment.

We also worked hard on language justice for English Language Learners. Our work resulted in the passage and enactment of a law that will require state agencies providing direct services to the public to provide translation of vital documents in the 12 most commonly-used languages in New York State. In addition, the law allows agencies to take regional variation into consideration. Funding for Victims of Crime had an especially difficult year. Normally a stable federal pass-through program, this year’s funding saw a $15 million deficit due to the pandemic. President & CEO Kristin Brown led the effort in alleviating the shortfall with state appropriation. Her expertise led to a temporary stopgap measure that will allow service providers to offer the same level of legal services to all victims of crime in New York State.

### Number of People who Benefitted from Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>29,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>31,754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Assistance</td>
<td>317,175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

377,935 People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation
Other Services: Technology and Other Innovations

During the 2021-22 grant period, we transitioned from TIME to cloud-based case management system Legal Server, enabling staff in all of our offices to access case and client files from anywhere and leading to increased efficiencies. Legal Server is highly customizable, allowing us to build out functionalities and processes that meets our unique needs. It has improved communication with clients, as well as the collection and analysis of outcome metrics. There is also potential to develop an online intake for potential clients who have access to a computer, laptop or mobile device. We are in the process of migrating from NetDocuments to SharePoint as our document management and storage system; this will improve our efficiency because SharePoint is both highly configurable and integrates with the Legal Server platform, allowing advocates to easily access client and case information and files wherever they are working and in meetings with clients. We recently signed a contract with Beringer Technology to assist with this migration.

We have continued to provide training and encourage the use of Office 365 and associated programs including 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, paying special attention to accessibility features. We are finalizing our transition from Salesforce to SalsaCRM as our marketing platform, strengthening our communications, messaging and branding, and enabling us to more easily track constituent engagements. We transitioned to Star2Star to facilitate remote access to our phone system. We are working with Lime Creative to restructure the backend of our website.

Funding from IOLA allowed us to make major organizational technology infrastructure improvements, including server and wireless router replacement in our Rochester and Albany offices, and a move to Sophos, giving us endpoint virus protection for all computers/servers with enhanced protections from ransomware/malware attacks. We partner with Dox Electronics to monitor our network infrastructure, assess potential security threats and improve/implement organizational solutions to enhance our organization’s security.
Other Services: 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 85% 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, Management Information Exchange, National Community Reinvestment Coalition, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, United Way of Greater Rochester Leadership Development, JustRoots Consulting, Beyond Boundaries Consulting, New York State Office of Victim Services, Legal Server and bar associations. At the Board level, we have a new Executive Team, including a new Chair and Vice Chair. We also conducted an onboarding orientation session for new members. During the 1st quarter of their first term in 2022, new members were provided training on the legal and fiduciary responsibilities of nonprofit boards, as well as an orientation to the history and work of Empire Justice Center. This session ensured 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) and its new iteration, Interrupt Racism, we continue the process of updating our internal policies to move the organization’s equity goals forward. These are community-wide initiatives in Rochester that seek to address racism by focusing on organizational change and building community capacity for racial equity. We are in the second year of a two-year contract with an independent consulting firm, Beyond Boundaries LLC, to assess organizational needs and help inform both our immediate next steps and an ongoing framework for continued evaluation and improvement.
Impact Cases

**N.N. v. Rochester City School District**

**Impact:** An estimated 8,500 special education students in the Rochester City School District.

**Description:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees “a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children.” In the course of our work representing individual families and students requiring a special education plan, we identified massive non-compliance with federal special education laws. We filed suit and worked cooperatively with the school district to file a joint motion for class certification and approval of consent decree. We subsequently filed an Amended Consent Decree in federal court, which was approved in March 2022. It further resolves claims in the lawsuit to secure the District’s compliance with special education laws. The settlement is an important step in helping Rochester City School District students with disabilities thrive and succeed on an equitable basis.

**Outcome:** The Decree requires the School District to meet objective goals that demonstrate continual measurable progress in providing timely services, improving achievement and graduation rates, eliminating racial disparities in classification and suspension, and increasing involvement with parents of students with disabilities. We continue to monitor the school district’s adherence to federal special education laws.

**Newkirk v. Pierre**

**Impact:** Approximately 10,000 Suffolk DSS applicants and recipients who have disabilities. This figure is split with NCLEJ in our statistical reporting.

**Description:** The Complaint alleges that the Suffolk County Department of Social Services against people with disabilities by systemically failing to provide the accommodations necessary to access and maintain benefits and services, in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The action seeks to compel Suffolk County DSS to develop and implement policies and procedures, including further training staff, to ensure that all Suffolk County residents with disabilities are able to obtain and maintain reasonable accommodations that give them access to benefits and services in compliance with federal law. Suffolk DSS opposed class certification.

**Outcome:** After months of intensive negotiations, the parties reached a comprehensive settlement, affording all class members significant vindication of their rights to reasonable accommodations. Although this represents a major milestone, the case is not over - the judge still needs to approve the settlement and conduct a “fairness hearing” to ensure that class members can be heard. We are hopeful that these steps will take place in 2022.
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. During the last year, 77 C.A.S.H. volunteers donated more than 3,870 volunteer hours to provide services for 2,984 households who claimed $7,450,312 million in Federal and NY State tax refunds and credits.

Law Students/Volunteer Interns – This past year Empire Justice and JustCause had 17 law student interns and volunteers who contributed 2,615.52 hours. Empire Justice involves 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 an ongoing reduction in volunteers and interns overall, and especially within our CASH program.

Attorneys Emeritus Program – Empire Justice and JustCause are approved AE host organizations. We were collectively host to ten Attorneys Emeritus during the reporting period who contributed 348.62 hours of legal work.

Pro Bono Attorneys – As noted elsewhere, JustCause is a well-recognized leader in the pro bono movement, and Empire Justice Center strategically partners with private attorneys who act as co-counsel on cases. During the 2021-22 grant period, 102 attorneys provided 903.02 hours.

- 534 Attorneys volunteered 903 hours
- 17 Law Students volunteered 2,616 hours
- 88 Other Volunteers volunteered 4,335 hours
Significant Collaborations

We continue to work collaboratively on many fronts. We currently subcontract with JustCause on our IOLA contract. JustCause’s mission is to ensure the existence of a readily available panel of skilled volunteer attorneys to resolve serious legal problems, and has been recognized by the American Bar Association (ABA) and the New York State Bar Association (NYSBA) as a leader in the pro bono movement. We subcontract with several of our legal services partners on other contracts, 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.

Sources of Funding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IOLA Grant</td>
<td>$946,799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations</td>
<td>$468,426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City and County Funding</td>
<td>$91,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Funding</td>
<td>$2,960,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Funding</td>
<td>$4,177,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>$1,033,787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$9,679,156</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>