Overview of Achievements

Thanks in part to the generosity of the Interest on Lawyers Account Fund (IOLA), Part of the Solution’s (POTS) work to help its primary target population of low-income Bronx residents receive access to justice through its Legal Clinic is progressing. During the reporting period of April 1, 2021 – March 31, 2022, POTS’ Legal Clinic services touched 2,725 individuals (977 households). IOLA’s funding bolstered the program during a critical time when many POTS clients were experiencing increased hardship due to the economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As this population was already vulnerable because of pervasive poverty, these conditions exacerbated their instability, particularly in the area of housing. As POTS worked to address the intensified needs of the community and help hundreds of clients to rebound from crisis, IOLA’s support played an important role in the organization’s achievements.

One major accomplishment that POTS noted was the ability for its legal team to provide assistance with eviction prevention and the elimination of rental arrears successfully despite continued restrictive conditions prompted by the pandemic. Because of the reduced operational capacity of New York City housing court and the multiple extensions of the New York State eviction moratorium in 2021, it took longer than normal to process cases, therefore delaying resolution. Even though most of reporting period included an eviction moratorium POTS’ legal team was able to eliminate the threat of eviction for 207 households and access public and private grants that resolved rental arrears.

The legal team was also able to assist 43 households access or maintain access to public assistance and SNAP that was improperly denied or facing reduction or termination.

**Population Served:** General Low Income Population

**Area Served:** Bronx County

**Total IOLA Grant:** $50,000

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**
- Total Staff: 8
- Lawyers: 4
- Paralegals: 3
- Other: 1
Overview of Achievements

Another major achievement for POTS’ Legal Clinic was the increased assistance provided to low-income Bronx residents through the legal team’s efforts regarding the New York State Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) and its Excluded Workers Fund (EWF). The legal team directed effort towards helping clients access economic relief through both of these programs. This funding proved to be an important resource for POTS clients, as many had accumulated a large amount of debt, and many were not eligible for government income supports due to being undocumented. The legal team worked to ensure that clients had access to these funds, which would provide a solution for rental arrears, late utility bills, and limited ability to pay future rent. Applying for these funds also provided protection from certain types of eviction and rent increases. Tenants who have suffered a financial hardship during the pandemic, and tenants who apply for ERAP are eligible for a stay of eviction proceedings. In addition to providing direct application assistance, POTS also disseminated information about ERAP and EWF extensively, including two online workshops, one in English and one in Spanish, to explain the application process and the legal protections it affords. Through March 31, 2022, the legal team at POTS helped 121 households get approved for ERAP, for a total of $1,748,684.41 in confirmed ERAP benefits paid. The case management team at POTS helped an additional 17 households receive $196,129.53 in ERAP funds. The combined staff at POTS also directly assisted 287 clients with EWF applications through November 2021, when the application portal closed. Of the clients assisted with the EWF application, POTS can confirm that 116 applications were approved, for a total of $1,809,600 in confirmed benefits paid. Many of these households used EWF award to pay down rent arrears.

The legal team alone was responsible for helping to access public and private financial benefits of $2,838,037.40.

The legal team’s work also continues to provide low-income Bronx residents with access to justice by equipping them with information necessary to protect their own stability. During the grant period, the Legal Clinic conducted community trainings that provided important information on New York State policies and financial resources for clients in need of legal assistance. The Legal Clinic offered six community trainings during the reporting period, three in English and three in Spanish. These online workshops educated clients and other community members on the general operational changes in Housing Court, the end of the New York State eviction moratorium, and general information on how to avoid eviction and access governmental and private resources that can eliminate rent arrears. These workshops and the knowledge imparted have proven to be effective anti-eviction tools for clients.
Direct Legal Services: Cases

The following client cases depict the direct civil legal assistance regularly provided by POTS’ Legal Clinic that focus on housing law and income maintenance:

Client Story #1
In one case, POTS’ Legal Clinic worked with two adult children who had lost both parents to the COVID-19 virus in April 2020. One household member was disabled. The other child became unemployed during the pandemic and became her brother’s caretaker. After succeeding to their parents’ rent stabilized tenancy, the clients were approved for Disability Rent Increase Exemption (DRIE), thanks to an application that was submitted with the assistance of the POTS team. They also received assistance from POTS’ case management team with securing and retaining SNAP benefits.

Client Story #2
POTS’ Legal Clinic client, a rent stabilized tenant who was 78 years old, sought assistance after her landlord informed her that they were unwilling to renew her lease and asked her to give up her apartment. After evaluating the case, POTS’ legal team advised the tenant that the landlord was required to offer her a lease renewal and contacted the landlord to ensure the lease was provided. The legal team then assisted the tenant in renewing her Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) benefit once her lease was finalized.
Other Services: Overview

Additional legal related services provided by POTS’ Legal Clinic give clients the resources to establish enduring stability after or while they are receiving help with legal representation.

POTS’ virtual community workshops aim to empower clients and equip them with necessary knowledge to protect their own stability. The Legal Clinic’s community trainings provide important information on New York State policies and financial resources for clients in need of legal assistance. The Legal Clinic offered six community trainings during the reporting period, three in English and three in Spanish. These online workshops, held in June 2021, October 2021 and February 2022 provided information to clients and other community members regarding the general operational changes in Housing Court, the end of the New York State eviction moratorium, how to access ERAP and general information on how to avoid eviction and access governmental and private resources for eliminating rent arrears. These workshops and the knowledge imparted have proven to be effective anti-eviction tools for clients. During the reporting period, 224 clients attended the virtual community trainings.

The legal team also provides application assistance for various financial relief programs, guidance with obtaining grants to eliminate arrears, and advocacy for clients when they are seeking funds from external partner organizations.

| Number of People who Benefitted from Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Community Legal Education       | 224 |
| Pro Se Assistance               | 355 |

579 People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation
Other Services: Technology and Other Innovations

During the 2022 fiscal year, POTS has continued to upgrade its Salesforce database to yield clearer comprehensive reports for both internal refinement and external reporting. POTS utilizes Salesforce to increase productivity by streamlining the intake process and allowing client-facing staff to inform clients on the range of services benefits that are available at POTS during their first visit. This means while a client may not know about the Legal Clinic upon arrival to POTS, they can be made aware of its additional services.

POTS’ Legal Clinic has been using the Zoom application more frequently for virtual workshops and community trainings that educate clients on legal assistance resources and to facilitate remote court hearings for clients. Texting clients via mobile devices has also allowed a more convenient option for them to share important documents rapidly. Lastly, POTS allows clients to utilize the technology available at its facility in order to ensure that clients who are not technologically savvy or who do not have access to technology still have an opportunity for justice to be served in their cases.

Other Services: Trainings

POTS places great emphasis on staff development. The organization provides in-house staff training for new staff members by POTS’ Supervising Attorney and its Director of Programs. They collectively have over 20 years of experience with housing and public benefits law, and with serving POTS’ client demographic of low-income Bronx residents. POTS also allocates $600 per employee for external professional development and makes use of extensive free professional development services available to nonprofit employees that include training on skills in supervising, providing feedback, and other skills directly related to the services POTS provides. Since mid-2020, POTS’ attorneys and advocates have attended more than 80 trainings including: Introduction to Public Assistance Eligibility and Budgeting, Family Homelessness Eviction Prevention Supplement (FHEPS) Major and Minor Rules, Employment Rights during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Representing Undocumented Workers During the COVID Pandemic, COVID-19: Changes to NYC Housing Programs and Systems, Remote Court Operations: Practical Considerations for Attorneys in the Virtual Courtroom, HP Actions During COVID-19, The Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019 and Its Effect on Counsel and Litigation One Year Later, and the Housing Court Answers Workshop.

Typically, all of POTS’ legal staff attends the biennial NYS Bar Association Legal Services Partnership Conference in Albany and participates in training sessions to learn more and network with others in the field. Legal staff also participate in trainings made available by the Community Service Society, the Legal Aid Society, Legal Services NYC, and the Bronx Housing Court on diversity and inclusion, anti-oppression, and cultural competency issues. POTS also supports the ongoing legal education of its attorneys by paying for all relevant Continuing Legal Education classes in the areas in which POTS practices and provides advice.
Other Services: Trainings

POTS’ bi-weekly staff meetings, attended by all staff, include professional development exercises that focus on removing perceived barriers and improving the client’s experience. POTS retains Paychex for human resources support services and conducts multiple mandatory trainings. These trainings address issues surrounding workplace harassment and diversity and inclusion trainings. POTS’ program staff also take part in diversity and civil rights trainings through partner organizations to ensure that clients are being served fairly and justly. All Legal Clinic staff are required to attend these trainings virtually or in-person. POTS’ Executive Director and Director of Finance and Operations have also taken several Diversity, Equity and Inclusion trainings in the past year aimed at helping nonprofit leaders structure their organizations more equitably. POTS’ Board of Directors also participate in trainings hosted by the Robin Hood Foundation regarding the responsibilities of board membership. Additionally, POTS recently retained an experienced non-profit leader to conduct training and staff discussion on diversity and dealing with the impact of the pandemic internally within POTS’ staff and in the community the organization serves. In 2021, POTS began a thorough, organization-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion process with the Equity Institute at Domus.

Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

POTS’ Legal Clinic enlists the help of law school students throughout the year to support the legal team’s work. In 2021, POTS hosted two students in the summer: one recently-graduated college student and one law student enrolled in their current academic year. POTS also hosted a first year law student who volunteered 5 hours a week from November 2021 to March 31, 2022, and another law student who used his experiences working at POTS to prepare a law research project regarding protecting tenants from eviction. The legal team was able to utilize the information that resulted from the project for memos and other legal resources.

The law school students helped the legal team with providing application assistance for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) and the Excluded Workers’ Fund (EWF), which increased the amount of clients that the Legal Clinic was able to reach with this resource.

3 Law Students volunteered 394 hours

1 Other Volunteer volunteered 210 hours
Significant Collaborations

During this reporting period, POTS worked with various organizations to ensure that clients had access to as much legal support as necessary to resolve their cases. POTS worked with New York Legal Assistance Group to receive guidance on dealing with cases that included social security benefits matters, disability hearings, termination cases, and budgeting advocacy. POTS also received client referrals from and provided client referrals to the Urban Justice Center, the Legal Aid Society, Bronx Defenders, Immigrant Justice Corps, Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, Mobilization for Justice and Legal Services of NY. These organizations were able to provide POTS clients with specific services above the organization’s current capacity, including referrals to receive emergency funding, legal guidance on immigration matters, additional client support for ERAP and EWF applications, and connections to HomeBase providers.

POTS’ Legal Team also collaborated with Coalition for the Homeless, Community Service Society, The Bridge Fund, Neighborhood Association for Inter-Cultural Affairs, the Gerstner Family Foundation, Catholic Charities, HELP USA and Bronxworks on several nonpayment housing cases. POTS was able to advocate for clients and work with the organizations to have grant requests approve for clients seeking assistance with eliminating rental arrears.

The Legal Team also participates in quarterly meetings with Bronx Solidarity, a collection of organizations for tenant attorneys and advocates who share, update, and strategize how to advocate for improvements in housing court practice. POTS’ Supervising Attorney serves on Bronx Solidarity’s Steering Committee.

The Supervising Attorney and one of POTS’ Staff Attorneys attend regular meetings with HRA and Housing and Homelessness Prevention advocates regarding how to improve HRA operations as it impacts POTS clients.

Lastly, POTS’ Legal Clinic Coordinator and one of its Legal Advocates are active members of the NYC Emergency Rent Coalition: a collection of community based organizations providing emergency financial assistance to clients, sharing information, and streamlining referrals and coordination between partner organizations. POTS’ Legal Team was able to utilize this network as a monthly source of information about law and policy changes, grants, where to target legal service outreach, and updates about other legal service providers.
Sources of Funding

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<th>Source</th>
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