



Community Impact Report

2022

70 years of transforming lives

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MESSAGE FROM CLA LEADERSHIP.

Seventy years ago, a group of civic-minded attorneys in Northeast Ohio came together. They saw a critical gap in the legal profession. People were coming to them with life-changing legal problems – like how to get custody of their children from an abusive ex-partner – but with no ability to pay a lawyer to help them. These attorneys set out to close this gap, and our organization was born.

Today, we remain steadfast in our mission of transforming people's lives through legal advocacy. But our work looks different now than it did all those years ago.

Reflecting back on the past year, there are several things we are focused on today that allow us to be successful advocates for our clients, and for our community.



Above: Former CLA logos from throughout the years.

“
We remain
steadfast in our
mission. But our
work looks different
today than it did all
those years ago.”



Steven J. McGarrity, Esq.
Executive Director



David E. Butz, Esq.
Board President

Connection. We are deeply connected in the communities we serve. Partnerships are the bedrock that our most impactful work is built upon. The successes we've seen – like tenants organizing to demand better living conditions from their landlords – only happen because our staff work with organizers and other agencies to proactively reach out into our community and walk alongside those we serve.

Impact. Legal aid work has always been about transforming people's lives. But our focus has expanded in recent years beyond individuals, to ways we can create a broader impact in our community. We have increased public awareness of how addressing legal problems is a necessary component of any effort to create a more just and equitable society, and we have a new generation of passionate attorneys representing our diverse community who are eager to take on systems of oppression.

Growth. We came out of the COVID-19 pandemic with better tools and approaches to serving our clients. From virtual options and advanced technology, to quickly adapting to the changing needs of our community, we are positioned better now than ever in our organization's history to tackle the issues facing our clients and community.

These pages tell that story – of how Community Legal Aid, rooted in our mission, is growing and changing to defend and protect the rights of our neighbors. We hope they give insight to the critical nature of our work and offer inspiration, hope, and healing.

OUR ORGANIZATION IS CHANGING & GROWING.

Here are some highlights of special projects and programs from 2022:

Court Clinic helps residents facing debt or homelessness.



The Clarence Darrow Court Clinic serves residents of Trumbull County who need help with housing and financial issues. The success of the clinic is built on the strong partnerships with all the courts in Trumbull County and the Trumbull County Bar Association. Residents facing eviction or debt collection are referred to the clinic by the courts and they speak with a pro bono attorney about their case before the court holds a hearing. In 2022, over 300 residents referred to the clinic by the courts received pro bono assistance. The clinic was supported by a Pro Bono Innovations Fund grant from the Legal Services Corporation. Because of the success of the clinic in Trumbull County, LSC awarded CLA additional funds to expand the clinic into Mahoning County.

Online clinic helps residents gain economic independence.

At the height of the pandemic, CLA launched the online Goodyear Legal Clinic in partnership with Goodyear's Legal Department. This innovative online clinic allows Akron-based Goodyear attorneys to volunteer their time to help residents in all the counties served by CLA. Clients receive pro bono assistance to seal criminal records and increase their job opportunities. In 2022, 50 residents successfully sealed their criminal records after receiving assistance from Goodyear attorneys.



Legal Aid gave me the advocacy I needed as well as the humane and professional, cordial treatment all human beings should experience. Thank you.

-CLA client

Partnership removes barriers to children's learning.

The I Promise Project serves the legal needs of families in LeBron James' I Promise Program in Akron Public Schools. In partnership with the LeBron James Family Foundation, CLA helps make sure children in the program have safe and stable housing, financial freedom, safety from domestic violence, and family stability - removing common barriers that impact children's abilities to learn. Embracing the Foundation's "We are Family" philosophy, a CLA managing attorney is embedded at the I Promise School and participates fully in the life of the school community, developing strong relationships with the I Promise families. This unique approach allows CLA to help families resolve legal issues before they become a crisis.



Advocacy blog highlights solutions to gaps in justice.



Big Ideas is a weekly blog launched during the pandemic. One article per week discusses a topic relevant to the issues facing our clients. Anyone can submit a topic, including staff from all levels of the organization, as well as guest contributors. The goal of Big Ideas is to highlight strategies that could bring about positive change in the lives of our clients.



WE'RE FOCUSED ON BIG OUTCOMES.

Here are some ways we've broadened our impact in housing, tax, and unemployment:



Addressing the highest eviction rate in the state



In April 2022, CLA hosted the first-of-its-kind Eviction Prevention Summit in Akron. Hundreds of people gathered – community leaders, housing advocates, philanthropic organizations, landlords, and tenants – to discuss Akron's record-high eviction rate and discuss solutions to the crisis facing the community. As a result, the City of Akron is exploring a pilot program that would guarantee renters facing eviction access to an attorney before going to court. This was one of eight recommendations that the community jointly made as a result of the Summit – including expanding a court program that provides professional mediation between landlords and tenants, reviewing city laws to create a more equitable balance of power between landlords and tenants, promoting pathways to homeownership for low-income renters, and more.

Scan the codes below to watch clips from the Summit, including the on-stage interview with Matthew Desmond, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Evicted*, or to read the report issued on behalf of the Summit planning committee.





Fighting double taxation of low-income Ohioans

CLA sued the state of Ohio in 2021 for improper record keeping practices for taxpayers who lose or never receive tax forms from their employers. The result has been that for decades, the state has not been crediting taxes paid by these residents, asking them to pay again (or often, not giving them a refund they should have received). Because of the nature of the issue, low-wage workers tended to be the ones to suffer from these practices. In 2022, the lawsuit was dismissed, but not before we made significant strides in addressing unfair practices against low-income taxpayers. As a result of this case, the state has changed how it's keeping its records and crediting taxpayer accounts. Additionally, with the media coverage and public dialogue on the issue, multiple bills have been proposed at the state legislature to address loopholes in Ohio's tax system. And we at CLA will continue monitoring the equitable treatment of low-income workers into the future.

NEWS Community Legal Aid and local residents sue Ohio for allegedly double-taxing incomes

Doug Livingston
Akron Beacon Journal

Published 4:15 p.m. ET Aug. 5, 2021 | Updated 4:28 p.m. ET Aug. 5, 2021



> LEARN MORE



Racial disparities in state unemployment system

Our team has been leading a statewide effort to modernize the state of Ohio's unemployment compensation system. While there have been challenges with our state's unemployment system for decades, the pandemic shed light on the outdated technology and racial disparities that exist within how Ohio administers unemployment. In collaboration with other legal aid organizations across the state, CLA is helping in the development of a newly overhauled system, as well as providing insight into data collection practices for transparency and accountability.



WE REMAIN GROUNDED IN OUR CLIENT'S STORIES.

When businesses shut down during the pandemic, an unprecedented number of Ohioans couldn't go to work and earn an income. This was the case for Cathy, a senior citizen who has owned her own business for years.

Cathy turned to the state's unemployment program, only to find herself denied benefits under the traditional program. She did, however, qualify for the newly formed Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which the government started when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

After applying, Cathy started receiving benefits. But then she received a notice stating that she hadn't provided the proper identification documents, her claim was being viewed as fraud, and she therefore had been overpaid \$8,000 in benefits.

Cathy tried to resolve the issue on her own, but navigating the over-burdened unemployment system proved to be too much. She was fearful she would be in trouble with the government and turned to Community Legal Aid for help.

Our team helped Cathy upload her documentation into the right places in the online system, helping her prove that her claim was not fraudulent so the overpayment could be waived. CLA's team also explained how the unemployment system works in a way Cathy could understand, helping her better advocate for herself when working with the unemployment office staff.

During this process, the team discovered that Cathy should have qualified for the state's traditional unemployment program all along, due to the way her business was structured. They then worked to ensure Cathy was receiving all of the benefits for which she was rightfully entitled.

Not only did Cathy have peace of mind resolving the false fraud claim and overpayment issue, she also received an additional \$10,000 in retroactive benefits by the time her case closed, giving her some financial freedom in getting her business back up and running as the world reopened.



Note: Stock photo. Client's name and some details have been changed to protect their anonymity. The above story does reflect the individual experience of a real CLA client.

OUR VOLUNTEERS BRING OUR MISSION TO LIFE.

For the past 15 years, Mike Sermersheim has volunteered to help northeast Ohio's low-income residents solve their legal problems through CLA's Volunteer Legal Services Program. He resists accolades or praise. As you will read in the interview below, he's truly just in it for the clients.

CLA: Welcome, Mike! Tell us how you got into volunteering with CLA.

Mike: For most of my career, I was an in-house attorney - I just worked and worked. I didn't have time to volunteer in the legal field. All my hours were spent at work, and what was left was spent with my wife, kids and our church.

I always knew I had it easier than some. My education and career options were laid out in front of me. I was able to afford my education. I was able to actually accomplish my goals through hard work. I don't think that's true for everyone - especially today.

I started volunteering with CLA in 2007 and have been active ever since. Even at the age of 73, I still feel grateful for my life experience and the opportunity to help others.

CLA: Was there a particular client or case that hooked you?

Mike: Legal Aid sent me a client who had been living a stable life. He was in his 80s, his wife died, and he was suddenly about to lose his home. I dug a little deeper and found his wife had a gambling problem. He mortgaged their home (a duplex) to pay off that debt.

I met this wonderful man in his tiny half of the duplex. He practically lived in a closet. There were four other people living with him in that unit and five more in the other half of the duplex. All were poor and had no means of self support. He essentially helped care for nine homeless individuals.

With just a small amount of effort, I helped save his home and transfer via probate his wife's share of the home to him (her interest in the home was never formally transferred to him).

I'll never forget when his daughter called me. She said "if he would have lost his home, he would have lost his soul and died." This case really showed me the impact volunteers can provide - this motivated me to do more.

CLA: What do you say to people who think volunteering with Legal Aid clients just isn't for them?

Mike: Yes, I've heard this. Some people tell me this work just isn't their "cup of coffee". They ask questions like - Haven't these people created their own situations? Aren't they in impossible situations to resolve? Don't you feel rather hopeless? My response is this - you don't know people well until you sit down with them, talk to them and get some perspective about them. Who knows what got people into their situation?

What I see collectively across our work at CLA - I see that we are truly helping people solve legal problems they couldn't solve alone. Maybe more importantly, we are helping them restore a sense of dignity in themselves and their life choices. Many have been dealt a card-like hand outside their control. There are some we can't ever help, but we need to be able to look beyond them to those we can. Grant me the serenity and wisdom to know the things I can change.

CLA: Any advice for attorneys who think they just don't have the knowledge or expertise?

Mike: (Laughing) I am one of them!

I'm a retired lawyer - I'm always reminded of how much I don't know. It's humbling to be back doing things I haven't done in 35 or 40 years. Or maybe never have done. It is an enriching and humbling experience.

My advice (to other attorneys with the inclination and desire to help) is to shed that apprehension of not being an expert. Just try it. I had my own big fears. I knew it had taken me decades to get certain expertise. Then I suddenly found myself walking into court again - something I hadn't for maybe 40 years - since my time in the Army JAG!



CLA: What are some tips you have for new pro bono volunteers?

Mike: For me, working with CLA clients was a whole different paradigm. You need to be persistent, sometimes you need to turn on the charm...you catch more flies with honey. A touch of kindness goes a long way. On the other hand, when you go into the courtroom - the judges, magistrates, and clerks all know you're pro bono. It's like their usual defense mechanisms with attorneys seem to vanish when they learn I am a retired volunteer. They want to help me. It's just so very positive and rewarding.

CLA: How is the support from CLA?

Mike: It's excellent. Legal aid people are devoted and wonderful. I am frequently amazed and pleased by my interactions with them. They are humble and yet warm, and glow (if you will) with their commitment. That sort of dynamic doesn't just grow on trees. Passionate people who come together to help people. To be included with open arms by a group of that ilk is very rewarding and enriching. They've been nice to me - it's so easy to feel a part of the group.

CLA: Do you have any goals for yourself as a volunteer?

Mike: I hope to be able to continue to expand and assist and better manage my time. There are moments when my personal life gets in the way of helping others. Clients are patient and they seem to understand those limitations. I can't believe I am still working on my time management in my 70s. You must keep growing and improving personally and professionally.



CIVIL LEGAL AID BREAKS THE CYCLE OF POVERTY.

Advocating for Returning Citizens

Promoting a fresh and equitable start for returning citizens by removing barriers to employment and housing, including criminal record sealing and certificates for qualifications for employment.

Learning is for Everyone Project

Ensuring that students have access to a quality education by empowering parents and care-givers to advocate for children with special needs, addressing root causes in educational disparities such as the school-to-prison pipeline, and providing holistic legal services to families of students with legal issues that are barriers to educational success.

Legal Aid HelpLine

The entry point for residents applying for help from CLA. HelpLine staff provide equitable support to applicants, offer applicant transitions from collaborative partner referrals, and also provide additional legal information and referrals for those not eligible for CLA's services.

Immigrants & Refugee Project

Ensuring that new Americans have equal access to the civil justice system as they enrich our culture and economy through holistic legal services for immigrants and refugees facing housing, financial, family, employment, or education barriers that keep them from thriving.

Debt Relief Project

Giving people a fresh financial start by reducing or eliminating debt, including consumer, medical, utility, and student loans, as well as helping consumers assert their rights in debt collection and garnishment matters.

Health, Education, Advocacy, and Law

Finding solutions to non-medical barriers that keep people from being healthy by providing holistic legal services to improve disparate health and learning outcomes related to students with special learning needs, infant and maternal health, and chronic disease.

Homeownership Project

Ensuring low-income homeowners have safe, stable, and affordable places to live by working directly with homeowners facing foreclosure to save their home, improve their financial situation, and assert their rights in foreclosure proceedings.

I Promise Project

Breaking the cycle of generational poverty for underestimated youth by providing holistic legal services to improve educational and social outcomes for students and families of LeBron James' I Promise Family, and through public policy matters to address racial disparities in education, school-to-prison pipeline, and expansion of the I Promise model.

Legal Assistance to Victims

Helping survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and stalking find safety and independence through holistic legal services for victims and vulnerable children to help them gain protection from physical, mental, and financial abuse.

Neighborhood Law Project

Promoting economic development in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods by providing legal advocacy, expertise, and support to strengthen grassroots efforts in expanding social justice and racial equity, empowering disinvested communities, and building coalitions for positive social change.

Public Benefits Project

Promoting economic justice for working class and low-income residents by helping clients obtain or maintain unemployment compensation, federal and state government benefits, including social security, disability, food and cash assistance, and Medicaid.

Veterans Legal Project

Supporting veterans and their families through holistic legal services, as well as collaborations for supportive services with local honor courts, VA hospitals, and veteran services commission offices.

Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic

Protecting the rights of low-income taxpayers by assisting taxpayers with controversies with the Internal Revenue Service, educating low-income residents about their tax rights and responsibilities, and advocating for equitable tax policies for low-wage earners.

The Parenthood Project

Dedicated to reducing disparities in visitation for noncustodial parents, especially for marginalized populations, through legal education, support, and direct representation.

Tenant Assistance Project

Ensuring low-income renters have safe, stable, and affordable places to live by helping renters maintain their home, improve their living conditions, and assert their rights in eviction proceedings.

Volunteer Legal Services Program

Expanding CLA's capacity for protecting the legal rights of working class and low-income people through partnerships with private attorneys, law firms, and corporate counsel offices.

WE'RE REFINING HOW WE MEASURE SUCCESS.

Our impact, by the numbers:

11,832 people helped in 2022



74% households served make less than **\$25k/year**



52% households helped include **children**



41% households helped include **seniors or people with disabilities**



480 community events



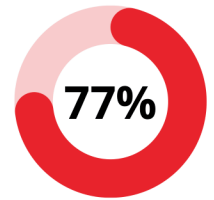
4,651 cases handled



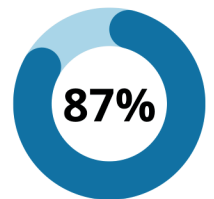
146 volunteer attorneys worked on cases

\$5.39 million

economic impact: dollars earned or saved for clients



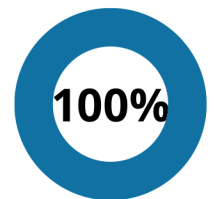
homes saved



financial relief



survivors protected

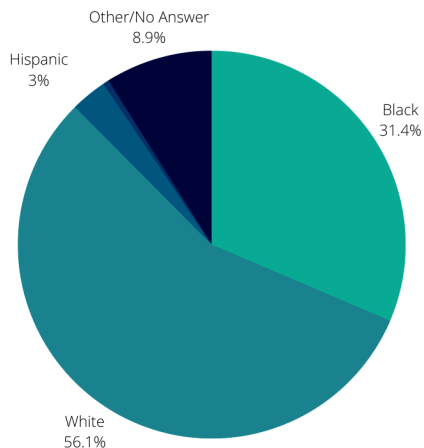


education barriers removed

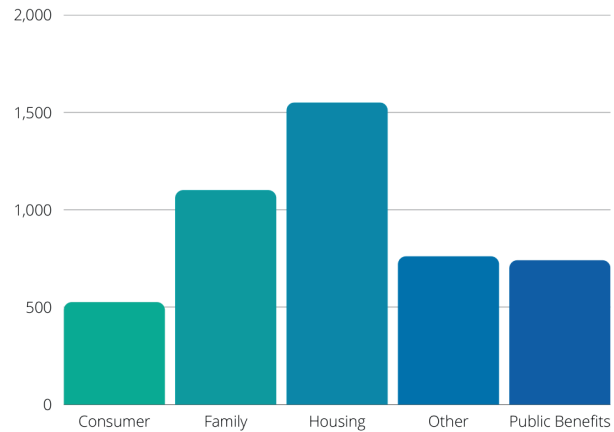


employment barriers removed

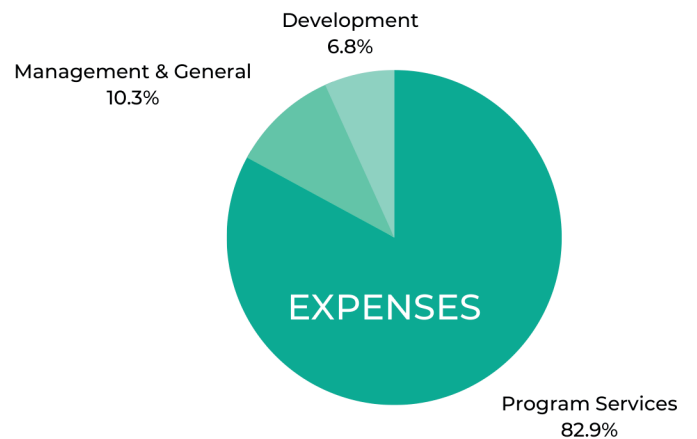
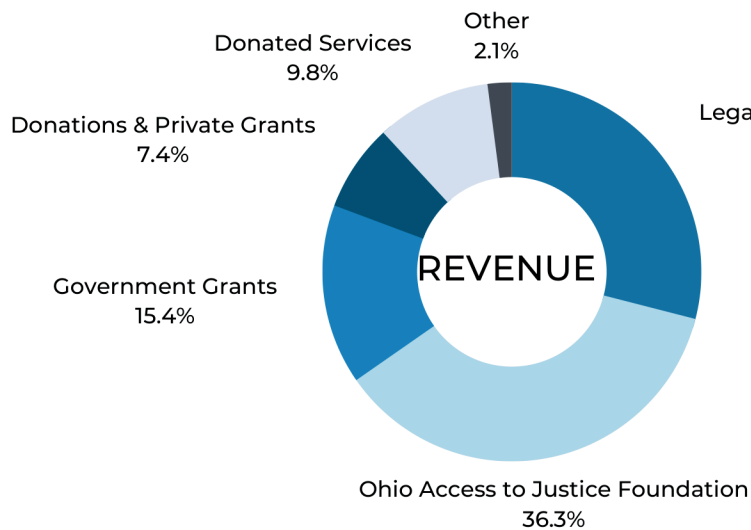
client race/ethnicity



case breakdown



Financial breakdown: \$9.7 million budget



Legal Aid was there to help my son and myself when the court system failed us year after year.

-CLA client

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The individuals and organizations listed below gave their time, talent, and treasure to help bring CLA's mission to life in 2022. Thank you for making this work possible!

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