



ANNUAL REPORT

2024

Update From Our Leadership

Dear Friends and Supporters,

Thank you for being part of our mission in 2024. Whether you are a donor, funder, pro bono attorney or community partner, we recognize the importance of our partnerships in providing legal help to those in need.

During a year of uncertainty and continued challenges for our client community, we focused on our mission — to transform the lives of those in poverty through legal advocacy.

Sometimes we measure success through big, impactful cases that try to bring about systemic change. But we cannot forget the impact of our day-to-day work on the thousands of members of our community we helped.

The senior veteran who was being evicted and did not know that his chronic health condition entitled him to medical and housing benefits through the Veterans Administration. Community Legal Aid helped him successfully apply for benefits and qualify for an assisted living facility. The eviction case was dismissed.

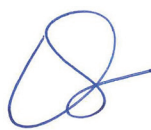
The divorced mother of young children whose ex-husband tried to strangle her and was afraid for her life. Community Legal Aid represented her in Family Court to get a five-year Civil Protection Order against her abuser.

The parent of a young daughter struggling to succeed in school who did not know how to get the proper help from the school district. Community Legal Aid advocated for the child with her school district to conduct an evaluation, which showed the child had learning disabilities. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) was negotiated and implemented. Months after the IEP went into effect, the child was performing well in school.

As we approach our milestone 75th anniversary in 2027, we remain focused on meeting the needs of those who face systems and laws stacked against them. Your support of our mission helps us bring justice to those who need it most.



Steven J. McGarrity, Esq.
Executive Director



David E. Butz, Esq.
Board President



Steven J. McGarrity, Esq.
Executive Director



David E. Butz, Esq.
Board President

Honoring the Legacy of John Petit

"If we don't help them, nobody will." – John Petit, Managing Attorney



On December 4, 2024, Community Legal Aid's Board of Trustees named our Canton office the John M. Petit Legal Advocacy Center in recognition of Managing Attorney John Petit's extraordinary impact on our staff, clients and community in his nearly 20 years of service.

"This space will forever serve as a testament to John's legacy, and to the indelible mark his work left on our community," Executive Director Steven McGarrity said.

John was in attendance along with his wife, family members, community partners, and longtime friends. In addition, a representative of the Legal Services Corporation attended and presented John with a commendation from LSC President Ron Flagg and LSC Board Chair John Levi for his dedication to civil legal aid.



John Petit is shown during the Dec. 4 celebration with Board of Trustees members (from left) Marcus Wainwright, Executive Director Steven McGarrity, David Butz, Nan Gelhard, Chris Wetherbee and Annah Williams.

"Our successful work is truly based upon the dedicated staff who have used their talents for mission work in the field of law to house the soon-to-be homeless; feed the hungry; protect the abused; and empower the voiceless," John said following the celebration.

John passed away in January 2025. His loss was felt throughout the organization and the community.

John dedicated his life and career to helping others. He joined Community Legal Aid in 2006 as a staff attorney after serving as an attorney for multiple child support agencies, as an assistant prosecutor, in private practice, and as an attorney with the Jesuits of Michigan and Ohio, where he provided legal services to low-income and homeless clients.

The depth and breadth of John's knowledge and experience in many areas of the law and his proven skills as an attorney led to his quick promotion in 2007 to Supervising Attorney of the HelpLine, where he managed our intake process. In 2009, he was promoted again, to Managing Attorney for the Family Law team. Over the next two years, he would add management of the Consumer Law and Housing Law teams to his portfolio.

Throughout this time, John developed extraordinary and impactful relationships with many leaders and partners throughout our eight-county service region. In particular, his work with the Stark County Fatherhood Coalition had a special place in his heart. Hearing the stories of countless fathers unable to see their children led John to develop an innovative model for providing legal representation to unwed fathers, especially Black fathers, to help them establish parenting time with their children. Beyond the individual and local impact his work had, his efforts also helped inspire change in these systems statewide.

In 2020, John became the Managing Attorney of the Neighborhood Law Project, where he managed our community economic development work. Among his many accomplishments with the project, John led his team to take on delinquent property owners of large, multi-unit complexes by organizing and guiding tenants to identify and document unsafe and unhealthy living conditions. He worked with grassroots advocates and property owners to resolve those issues.

"John was a real lawyer's lawyer," Steven McGarrity said. "As a lawyer, he feared nothing and no one. If a colleague found themselves in over their head, John always stepped in to mentor and co-counsel. When a particularly tough case would come in, John would be the first to volunteer to take it on. If a tenant walked into the office an hour before an eviction hearing, he would drop everything and head over to Municipal Court to try and save the client's home. His dedication and leadership were nothing short of inspiring."

While we have lost a dear colleague, servant leader, mentor, and friend, John's legacy will live on through the incredible work of the attorneys and paralegals at the John M. Petit Legal Advocacy Center.

Spotlight on Athena Gough

Athena Gough has been fighting to stay safe for more than a decade, and Community Legal Aid has been by her side all that time.

Our attorneys assisted her in obtaining a divorce from her abuser, achieving her goals in keeping custody of her children, and maintaining her housing. Most recently, legal aid attorney Jeanne Charles helped Athena successfully obtain another renewal of the civil protection order against her abusive ex-husband.

"Jeanne helped me secure 10 more years of my protection order and has been such a rock in helping me navigate further protection orders," Athena said. "In Ohio, you have to go back every five years to try to renew your order, and the process is a bit scary and can be paralyzing."

Athena is a grateful client who has served on the Community Legal Aid Board of Trustees since 2019. She credits Community Legal Aid's help with making it possible for her to improve her job prospects and find better housing for herself and her two daughters.



Athena Gough

Hear Athena share more of her story and the impact of Community Legal Aid as a recent guest on the Talk Justice Podcast hosted by the Legal Services Corporation. Scan the QR code to listen.



Client and Champion of Community Legal Aid

"When I first came to legal aid, it was right after I had to report my ex-husband to the police for violating the domestic violence protective order," she said. "When he was arrested, I decided to go to the courthouse and look into filing for divorce because I thought it would send a more solid message. But just the cost of filing paperwork myself would cost close to \$300. While I was making enough money to take care of my kids and my family, I didn't have the money to file for divorce. I walked out of the courthouse feeling a little scared."

Then she remembered that Community Legal Aid had successfully helped others she knew. Athena thought she made too much money to qualify for help, but once she went through intake, she found she did qualify and could be helped.



"Athena is courageous and resilient in ways that no person should have to be. I am so proud to have had the opportunity to stand alongside her on multiple occasions. Her story illustrates that for many of our clients, we can do more than solve one legal problem. This is one of the many reasons legal aid is so important to our communities."

— Jeanne Charles, Managing Attorney

"My legal aid attorney was kind and strong," she said. "It's terrifying to go into courts on your own without the knowledge of what you need to say and what you need to do to get a better outcome."

"It's incredibly empowering to have someone there who knows the system, who is helping you speak up for yourself," she added.

2024

By the Numbers



12,892

individuals helped



4,930

cases handled



15,536

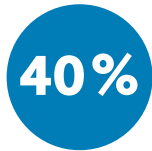
intake applications



of households served make less than \$25,000 per year

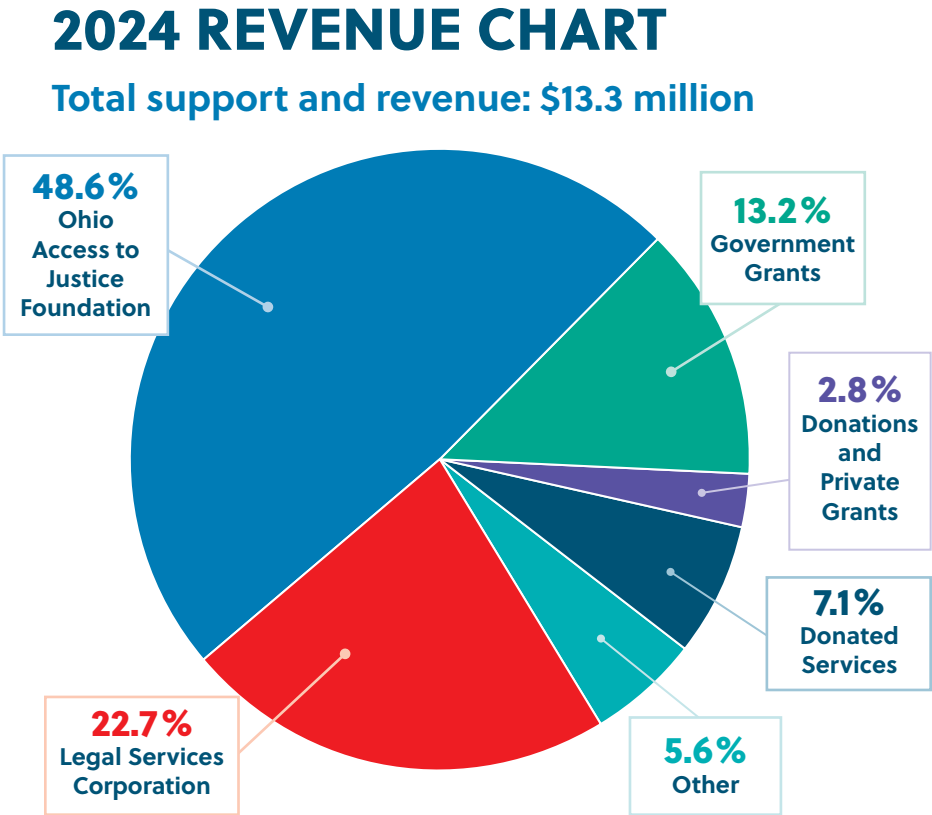
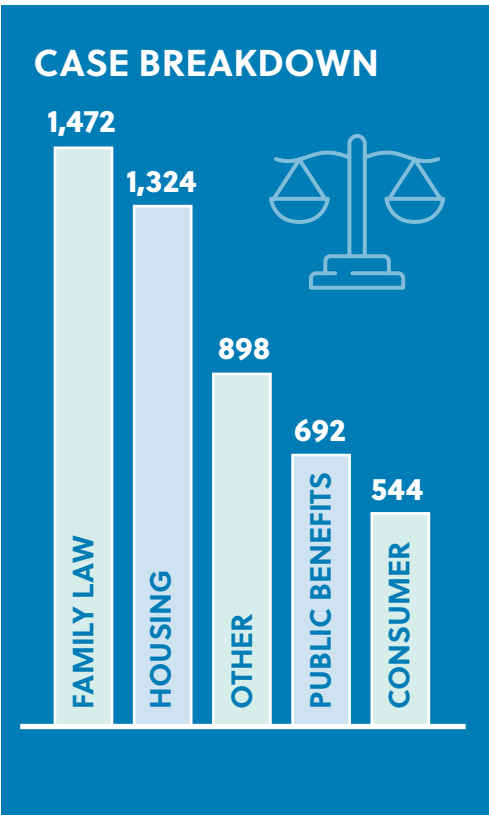


of households helped included children



of households helped included seniors or people with disabilities

\$6.73 million in economic impact (dollars earned or saved for clients)



Pro Bono Attorneys Find Value in Service



Attorney Dan Keating is our 2024 Trumbull County Volunteer of the Year.

For attorney Dan Keating, giving his time to help Community Legal Aid clients just makes sense.

"I mostly volunteer in the area of probate," he said. "I've seen that so many people don't have a will. It's easy for me and helpful for them."

Niles resident Keating has been part of Community Legal Aid's pro bono program for more than a decade. During that time, he's handled more than 120 cases.

His service to the organization is so meaningful that our Volunteer Legal Services Program team selected him as the Trumbull County Volunteer of the Year for 2024.

In 2024, we honored several other attorneys as our Volunteers of the Year: Michele Sherrin (Medina), Rosemary Rubin (Stark), Marquita Thatcher (Summit), Timothy R. Thomas (Portage), Richard Schwartz (Mahoning) and Monica Miyashita (Wayne).

We are also grateful for corporate legal partners such as Goodyear, FirstEnergy and Brennan Manna Diamond for their pro bono work for our clients.

"We can't do the work we do without the attorneys who take part in our Volunteer Legal Services Program," said Elsa Reale-Gottfried, the managing attorney who oversees the program. "Whether they took one case or 10, we are so thankful to them for sharing their time to help our clients."



Managing Attorney Elsa Reale-Gottfried is shown with Attorney Marquita Thatcher, our Summit County Volunteer of the Year.

The need for
legal services for
low-income people
is great, and
we are always in
need of more
pro bono volunteer
attorneys.

For more information
or to sign up, go to:
[www.communitylegalaid.org/
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or call
330-983-2568

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149

Pro Bono Attorneys



1,021

cases handled



98%

positive outcomes
for our clients

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Our work is only possible thanks to the hard work, dedication and contributions of those individuals and organizations listed below and on the following pages. **Thank you to all of our supporters for being part of our mission!**

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Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
Ohio Department of Medicaid
Ohio Housing Finance Agency
Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services

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Stark County Department of Job and Family Services
Stark County Family Court
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LEGAL AID

Community Legal Aid
50 S. Main St., Suite 800
Akron, Ohio 44308

Our Mission

Through legal advocacy, we transform the lives of those in poverty to increase opportunities, fairness, and stability, for a stronger community and justice for all.

Our Vision

We believe that all individuals, including those who are impoverished, should have the opportunity to control, improve, and enrich their lives and community.

www.communitylegalaid.org

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