

LAWVO



LEGAL AID OF WESTERN OHIO, INC.



Annual Report | 2023

Dear Friends and Supporters,

As we reflect on 2023, I am excited to share some significant developments at Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc. (LAWO) that emphasize our commitment to continuing to provide high quality legal services to individuals and households living in poverty.

This past year, the advocates at LAWO made significant strides in supporting survivors of domestic violence, particularly those with disabilities and from underserved communities. Through the SAFE (Safety & Accessibility for Everyone) Project, funded by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), we enhanced service accessibility and developed an accessibility policy for use in the community. Additionally, we received funding to develop a training curriculum focused on the intersection of race and disability, aiming to better serve BIPOC survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault with disabilities. We also secured a three-year Legal Assistance for Victims (LAV) grant to expand legal services and support for survivors of strangulation.

Being mindful of recent changes in technology and cyber security, last November we transitioned from Pika to the Legal Server Case Management System. This upgrade was pivotal for enhancing our ability to manage cases, track time, ensure compliance, communicate effectively with applicants and clients, and provide more effective and efficient legal assistance. A dedicated team of LAWO employees has been working tirelessly since February 2023 to implement this system, which we expect to meet our needs for the next 15 to 20 years.

Keeping our eyes on the future, the Board is committed to creating and implementing a new strategic plan to guide our advocacy and operations for the next five years. We expect to have a new plan set in 2024, using our 2023 needs assessment as our primary guide through the process. The plan will help us refine our priorities so that we will continue to deliver exceptional legal services to all of our communities.

These initiatives highlight only a few of the phenomenal programs, projects, and cases that our advocates work on day to day. The Board is immensely proud of these accomplishments. We remain dedicated to improving our operations, enhancing our services, and addressing critical issues in our communities. Your support has been invaluable in making these advancements possible, and we look forward to continuing this journey together. **Thank you for being a vital part of our mission.**

With heartfelt thanks,

**Cassandra Rice
Board President
Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc. (LAWO)**

**NEXT:
Our Top Victories and
Accomplishments in 2023**

Children Affected by Substance Abuse Disorders

The Grandfamily Legal Assistance Project focuses on increasing grandfamily stability through the establishment of appropriate legal relationships and decision-making authority. Targeted education, legal representation, and referrals have improved grandfamily financial situations, leading to grandfamily stability. The project uniquely serves children affected by the opioid crisis, assisting grandparents who have assumed caregiving roles due to the crisis, and addresses critical needs such as acquiring decision-making authority and filing for custody, especially in rural communities with limited services. LAWO also prioritizes domestic violence cases involving children, recognizing the lasting impact on children who witness or experience abuse. Advocates focus on resolving custody and visitation issues to end the cycle of abuse, collaborating with community partners to provide counseling and support for children.



Agricultural Workers

LAWO visited 182 agricultural camps in 39 counties identified as having seasonal and migrant farmworkers. The outreach staff visited 479 housing units; reached 2,729 workers; distributed 1,779 Harvest Calendars, which include information on employment, domestic violence, education, field sanitation, housing, and taxes and provide agricultural workers with a means of documenting the dates and hours of their employment and wages received; distributed 607 heat stress educational materials; and provided crucial information to hundreds of agricultural workers about the USDA's Food and Farm Work Relief Program, which offered modest one-time payments to eligible workers who worked throughout the Covid 19 crisis.

Household Stability & Pro Bono

In 2023, the Pro Bono Program held over 45 pro se divorce and custody clinics that were conducted in nine of our rural counties throughout our service area. Working in collaboration with the Greater Dayton Volunteer Lawyers Project (GDVLP) and the Toledo Bar Association (TBA)—as well as several community organizations, libraries, and other non-profit organizations—we also provided pro bono assistance in the areas of Criminal Record Sealing, Driver's License Reinstatement, Advanced Directives, Eviction Record Sealing, Housing, and a variety of Family Law matters. We successfully started the formation of Safe Harbor Clinics for human trafficking survivors in the Dayton area with collaboration among LAWO, GDVLP, and the Ohio Justice Bus. The Ohio Justice Bus visited over seven of our rural counties in 2023 with LAWO's Pro Bono Program, collaborating to meet client needs in our rural communities.



Older Adults

LAWO provides a full menu of legal services to older adults across our service area, successfully representing them in consumer debt collection cases, bankruptcy cases to protect income or a home, housing conditions and housing preservation cases, and health care and public benefits cases. Outcomes include reduction or elimination of debt, relief from creditor harassment, income and asset preservation, housing stability, health care, and income maintenance. Our Plan Ahead and Protect Yourself Legal Series for Seniors legal education classes and clinics continue to address the rise in elder abuse and financial exploitation. Through the series, older adults achieve peace of mind and preserve independence and self-determination through completion of advance directives and other planning documents. These services directly impact the ability of older adults to remain in their homes and neighborhoods and to make decisions to remain autonomous and live independently for as long as they can do so.



Survivors of Domestic Violence

LAWO helps crime victims enforce their rights under Marsy's Law, ensuring their privacy, presence, and safety during criminal proceedings. This advocacy improves outcomes in both criminal and civil cases, leading to increased prosecutions and greater trust in the justice system. In 2023, LAWO received a prestigious grant to expand this work, focusing on strangulation victims and reaching survivors of color.

Veterans

In 2023, LAWO engaged with veteran-serving organizations throughout our service area to meet the often unique legal needs of veterans and their families. We regularly meet with these organizations to provide training and consultation, addressing veterans' legal issues. We also directly represent veterans in housing, debt collection, public benefits, and family law cases, preventing evictions, maintaining economic security, and providing civil protection order assistance. We continually seek to expand our capacity to serve more veterans.





JUSTICE PREVAILS: LAWO Helps Victim of Ponzi Scheme

IN August 2018, Mr. Singh* attended an Identity Theft and Senior Protection presentation. Soon thereafter, he was approached by the presenters with what sounded like a safe and sensible investment opportunity. The promise of a 4.5% annual return on his investment seemed like a secure financial move at the time, especially coming from the presenters themselves. He presumed them to be experts on such matters.

As time passed, it became clear that the “investment opportunity” was nothing more than a Ponzi scheme, with Mr. Singh the victim. The individuals behind the fraudulent business not only failed to deliver on their promises, but also manipulated Mr. Singh into divesting all he had under false pretenses, with various promises of a significant rate of return as well as assistance in qualifying for government benefits if he gave them permission to hold his money.

With limited English-speaking ability and a lack of understanding of financial matters, Mr. Singh had been taken advantage of and left in an extremely vulnerable position, eventually becoming reliant upon the financially and emotionally abusive actions of the investment company and its owners. When he shared the details of his story with Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc. (LAWO), we were committed to seeking justice for Mr. Singh, no matter how long it took.

“By the time Mr. Singh came to LAWO, most of his money had been drained from his accounts,” said LAWO Attorney Joseph Stanford. “Mr. Singh is in his mid-60s. He had hoped to retire before long but was instead the victim of a Ponzi scheme. Soon after the abusers stole his life savings, they even began controlling Mr. Singh’s whereabouts. Mr. Singh so feared for his safety that he hid in a friend’s attic for several months before eventually moving

to the Cherry Street Mission and later the Toledo Gospel Rescue Mission.”

Through diligent investigation and litigation, LAWO was able to recover all of Mr. Singh’s money and additional damages. The case settled for just under \$400,000, an astounding and life-changing amount for a man who had once been homeless.

This client success was made possible through a collaboration with Lucas County Adult Protective Services and our legal team’s persistence in pursuing justice. Mr. Singh’s case highlights the importance of LAWO services in protecting vulnerable individuals from financial exploitation and fraud from predatory people and companies. His story is a testament to the resilience and persistence of those who seek justice against scams targeting vulnerable community members.

**Name changed for privacy.*



CONSUMER RIGHTS & FINANCIAL FREEDOM: *LAWO Helps Client Dig Out of Credit Card Debt*

WHEN Sofia* was faced with a lawsuit over a credit card debt totaling \$1,144.70, plus interest and costs, she felt overwhelmed and scared, leading her to contact LAWO for help. Sofia's only income was from Social Security, which is protected from being seized by creditors. Since she owned the home she lived in, however, her housing security would be at risk of a lien if a judgment went against her.

During a conversation between Sofia and her Legal Aid attorney, it emerged that she had taken out a credit card years ago but had not made payments since before 2013. Moreover, she claimed there was no contract.

Considering the passage of time, her lawyer explained that the statute of limitations might have expired, which typically restricts the time within which a creditor can sue for a debt. In this case, the statute of limitations for consumer debt is six years.

To protect Sofia's interests, her attorney prepared a comprehensive response, citing affirmative defenses including the statute of limitations and laches. Her lawyer also initiated written discovery requests to gather more evidence, particularly focusing on the expiration of the statute of limitations.

Instead of responding to these discovery requests, the creditor opted for a

dismissal without prejudice, a legal maneuver that allows them to potentially refile the lawsuit in the future.

LAWO made sure the client understood the implications of this dismissal and advised her to retain all documents related to the case in case of future legal action. Additionally, Sofia's lawyer informed her about potential recourse under the Federal Fair Debt Collection Practices Act.

In the end, Sofia was pleased with the outcome of the case, relieved from immediate legal pressure, and armed with knowledge and preparation for any future challenges.

**Name changed for privacy.*



HOUSING JUSTICE THROUGH RIGHT TO COUNSEL: George's Story

LAWO recently helped a tenant facing eviction maintain his housing. George* had just moved into his apartment when his landlord accused him of dishonesty, alleging he had not truthfully disclosed whether he had been convicted of or charged with a felony.

George's legal team at LAWO sprang into action, conducting thorough research and filing a motion to dismiss the eviction complaint. They represented George in court, arguing that his record was sealed and therefore he had not been untruthful. The judge agreed and dismissed the

complaint for eviction. Thanks to the diligent efforts of LAWO, George can now enjoy living safely and securely in his apartment.

George is just one of thousands of people dealing with housing insecurity in our communities. When the City of Toledo decided to work with legal aid and other local community partners committed to addressing housing and poverty issues, it enacted Right to Counsel legislation in 2022 that has made a significant impact on people and families like George.

**Name changed for privacy.*

When a tenant has the same rights and legal resources as the landlord, the playing field is much more level and balanced.

LAWO by the Numbers:

4,252
Closed Cases

11,131
Requests for Legal Assistance

12,890
Persons Helped


\$6,539,696+
Total Monetary Awards for Clients*

2023 Expenses	
Compensation & Benefits	\$6,034,907
Operating Costs	\$1,409,439
Contracted Services	\$877,459
Travel, Support, & Training	\$150,981
Other	\$30,327
Total:	\$8,503,113

2023 Operating Support & Revenue	
Grants & Contracts	\$2,236,682
Legal Services Corporation	\$4,389,317
Ohio Access to Justice Foundation	\$1,650,795
Fundraising & Special Events	\$77,577
Other Income	\$205,771
Subtotal	\$8,560,142
Transfer to Reserves	\$57,029
Total:	\$8,503,113

These numbers do not include the additional **thousands** of people who have benefited from materials and information on our website; pro bono legal assistance clinics; attendance at community legal education presentations and trainings; continuing legal education presentations for lawyers; and outreach visits to homeless and domestic violence shelters, senior centers, health clinics, older adult homes, and agricultural worker labor camps.

*Obtained benefits and awards in areas of child support, spousal support, unemployment compensation, supplemental security income, debt write-off, disability assistance, food stamps, and damages.



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Tatum Si'Mayah



Pictured: Summer Associates Nia Shuler, Sarah Sahmarani, and Allison Gilbert visit the Wood County Common Pleas Courthouse.

2023 Funding Partners



Area Agency on Aging

Area Agency on Aging (AAA) PSA2: Support for legal assistance for older adults in Champaign, Clark, Darke, Green, Logan, Miami, Montgomery, Preble, and Shelby counties.

Area Agency on Aging (AAA) PSA3: Support for legal assistance for older adults in Allen, Auglaize, Hancock, Hardin, Putnam, and Van Wert counties.

Area Agency on Aging (AAA) PSA5: Support for legal assistance for older adults in Ashland, Crawford, Huron, Richland, Seneca, and Wyandot counties.



Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, Inc., PSA4

Support for legal assistance for older adults in Defiance, Erie, Fulton, Henry, Lucas, Ottawa, Paulding, Sandusky, Williams, and Wood counties.



City of Toledo - Federal Community Development Block Grant:

Support for legal assistance in housing matters for low-income City of Toledo residents.

City of Toledo - Tenants' Right to Counsel in Eviction Proceedings: Support for legal

assistance in housing cases for tenants facing eviction proceedings in Toledo Municipal Court and related activities.

Great Lakes Community Action Partnership: Support for housing stabilization services for veterans in Ottawa, Sandusky, Seneca, and Wood counties.



Legal Services Corporation: Major source of funding to support LAWO services in 32 northwest and west central Ohio counties and statewide legal services for agricultural workers.

Lucas County Department of Job and Family Services: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Title XX funding for legal assistance

to low-income Lucas County individuals and families.



Maumee Valley Guidance Center: Support for legal services for veterans.

Miami County Department of Job and Family Services: Support for legal services for eligible Miami County residents.



Montgomery County Board of County Commissioners: Support for legal services for older adults, survivors of domestic violence, families at risk of Children Services

involvement, and people seeking employment.



Ohio Access to Justice Foundation (OAJF):

Support for legal services to address the unmet civil legal needs of low-income and underserved Ohioans.



Ohio Attorney General Victims of Crime Act (VOCA):

Support for legal assistance to survivors of domestic violence.



Housing Finance Agency

Ohio Housing Finance Agency:

Support for homeowners' assistance.



Ohio State Bar Foundation (OSBF):

Support for the Getting Legal Support from Abuse video series.

Sandusky Municipal Court:

Support for legal assistance for tenants in the Municipal Court.



Springfield Foundation
For good. For ever.®

Springfield Foundation:

Support for legal services for low-income residents of Clark County.

St. Vincent de Paul: Support for legal services for veterans.

Toledo Municipal Court:

Support for legal services for low-income City of Toledo residents in eviction and debt collection cases.



United Way of Defiance County: Support for legal

assistance to low-income residents of Defiance County.

United Way of Fulton County: Support for legal assistance to low-income residents of Fulton County.



U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ): Support for training and services to end violence against women with disabilities, support to provide legal assistance for victims, and support for the Justice for Families program.

Volunteers of America: Support for legal services to veterans.

2023 JUSTICE FOR ALL CAMPAIGN

We'd like to thank

the people and organizations who made our annual campaign a success, helping us raise awareness and funds for vital civil legal services to assist low-income people, including veterans, students, immigrants and agricultural workers, and everyday families and individuals trying to make ends meet in northwest Ohio. All funds raised through the Justice for All Campaign (JFAC) support the joint efforts of Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc. (LAWO), Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. (ABLE), and the Toledo Bar Association (TBA).



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ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Awards

— DINNER & CEREMONY —

The 2023 Access to Justice Awards Dinner and Ceremony welcomed 300 guests who attended the event, held on May 25, 2023, at The Pinnacle in Maumee. Each year, funds are raised to support LAWO, ABLE, and the Toledo Bar Association's Pro Bono Legal Services Program and our combined efforts to assist people who cannot afford civil legal services.

Keynote speaker Mónica Ramírez inspired the crowd of attorneys, advocates, and supporters with a message of hope and equality for female migrant workers in Ohio.

Additionally, we honored Eugenio Mollo, Jr. from the University of Toledo College of Law with the 2023 Public Interest Law Award; Ramón Pérez, a life-long activist in Toledo's Latinx community with the 2023 Community Advocacy Award; and the Honorable Myron C. Duhart of the Ohio Sixth District Court of Appeals with the 2023 Distinguished Service Award.



Pictured: Executive Director Kevin Mulder with keynote speaker and activist Mónica Ramírez.

2023 Campaign for Equal Justice ★

2023 Campaign for Equal Justice Co-Chairs, Ambassadors, & Steering Committee

The annual Campaign for Equal Justice

generates funds to support low-income community members residing in the Miami Valley region. Benefiting LAWO, ABLE, and our pro bono community partner, the Greater Dayton Volunteer Lawyers Project (GDVLP), the campaign includes two annual events for the legal community and our supporters: The mixer event, Justice on Tap, and the more formal Access to Justice Awards.

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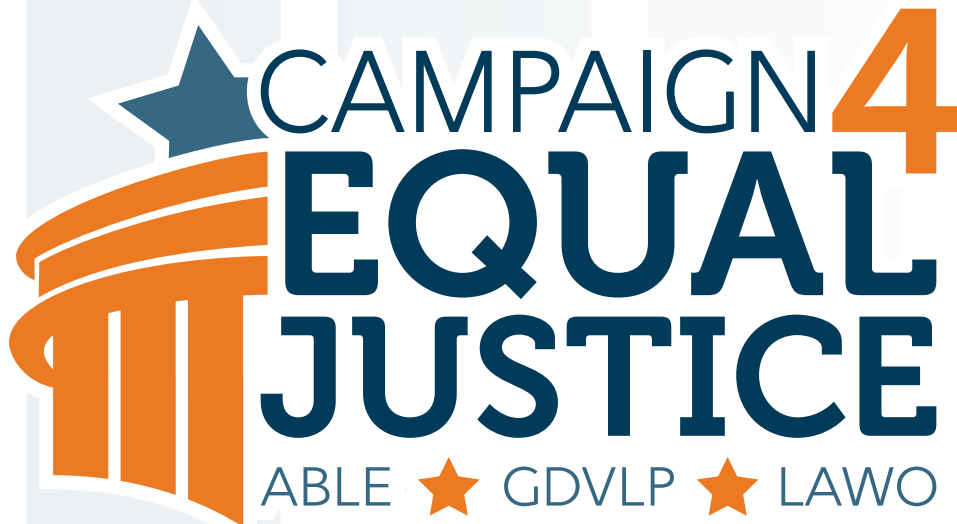
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JUSTICE ON TAP!

ABLE ★ GDVLP ★ LAWO

Young professionals

and legal aid supporters gathered at the Dayton Beer Company on September 20, 2023 to learn more about the Campaign for Equal Justice and the combined efforts of ABLE, LAWO, and GDVLP, and to participate in fun raffles and giveaways to financially support free civil legal services in the Greater Dayton area.



ACCESS² JUSTICE AWARDS 2023

ABLE ★ GDVLP ★ LAWO

The 2023 Access to Justice Awards Celebration

welcomed approximately 200 guests to Sinclair Community College for an evening of community advocacy and camaraderie on November 3, 2023.

Funds raised during the event support the Campaign for Equal Justice and are distributed among LAWO, ABLE, and the GDVLP to assist with community legal needs. We assist people facing unstable housing conditions and domestic abuse; work with individuals, families, and older adults navigating the complex medical and education systems; and ensure immigrants and agricultural workers know their rights in their places of employment.

The event's guests of honor included 2023 Lloyd O'Hara Public Interest Law Award recipient Ericka Curran with the University of Dayton School of Law, and the 2023 Patricia Rousseau Community Advocacy Award recipient Laura Bucio with Tecumseh Local Schools.



Pictured: Director of Advocacy Patricia Hernández with awardee Laura Bucio.

LAWO has offices located in Dayton, Defiance, Findlay, Lima, Sandusky, Springfield, and Toledo, and serves 32 counties in northwest and west central Ohio. LAWO also serves agricultural workers throughout the state.

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