



# 2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT

42 West 44th Street  
New York, NY 10036

[www.citybarjusticecenter.org](http://www.citybarjusticecenter.org)



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*Built for justice.  
Built for pro bono.*

## OUR MISSION

The City Bar Justice Center (CBJC), the largest division of the City Bar Fund which is the nonprofit affiliate of the New York City Bar Association, furthers access to justice by addressing unmet civil legal needs of New Yorkers struggling with poverty and systemic socioeconomic barriers. CBJC mobilizes law firms, corporate legal departments, and other legal institutions to provide pro bono legal services; educates the public on pertinent legal issues; fosters strategic community relationships; and impacts public policy. CBJC's dozen civil justice projects, including the largest civil legal hotline in New York, are led by a staff of dedicated attorneys and professionals who each year, provide more than 24,000 New Yorkers with high-quality civil legal services through brief advice and information, referrals, and both limited scope and extended representation.

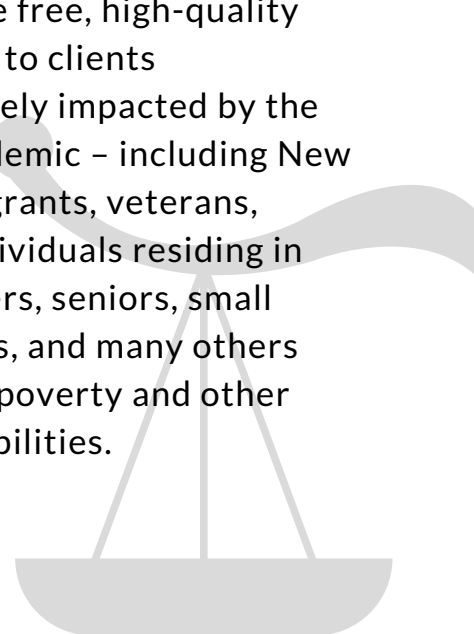
# 2020-21 HIGHLIGHTS

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept through New York City, the City Bar Justice Center moved swiftly to provide its clients with emergency relief during a time of unprecedented need. Amid a crisis filled with uncertainty, the Justice Center team stepped up with courage and determination to transition to a remote legal services model and developing tailored pro bono programming and services. By April 2020, CBJC project directors Akira Arroyo and Libby Vazquez and then-pro bono counsel Kurt Denk launched three COVID-19-specific initiatives: the Legal Hotline COVID-19 Expansion, the Neighborhood Entrepreneur Law Project's COVID-19 Small Business Remote Legal Clinic, and the Planning & Estates Law Project's front-line healthcare workers initiative.

In addition, CBJC engaged in frontline advocacy on issues affecting our clients. The Legal Clinic for the Homeless, in a joint effort with the New York City Bar Association, led the citywide #Wifi4Homeless campaign to help secure access to Wi-Fi and internet-ready devices for New Yorkers residing in city homeless shelters.

The Immigrant Justice Project, in close partnership with pro bono partners, opposed a cascade of proposed regulations that aimed to dismantle and reconfigure the immigration system – changes that posed particularly devastating risks to the most vulnerable immigrants.

This report highlights the tremendous work accomplished in the past year with the outstanding support of the extended City Bar Justice Center community – a fierce cohort of colleagues, pro bono partners, community partners, volunteers, and donors. This community's collective contributions made a powerful impact, enabling CBJC to provide free, high-quality legal assistance to clients disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – including New York City immigrants, veterans, families and individuals residing in homeless shelters, seniors, small business owners, and many others struggling with poverty and other related vulnerabilities.



# IMPACT



**9,000**

People assisted through community outreach



**24,000**

People benefited from direct legal services



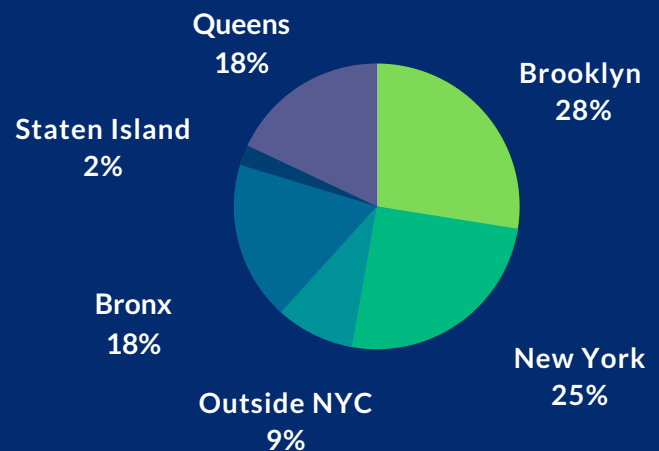
**317,000**

People reached through online resources and information

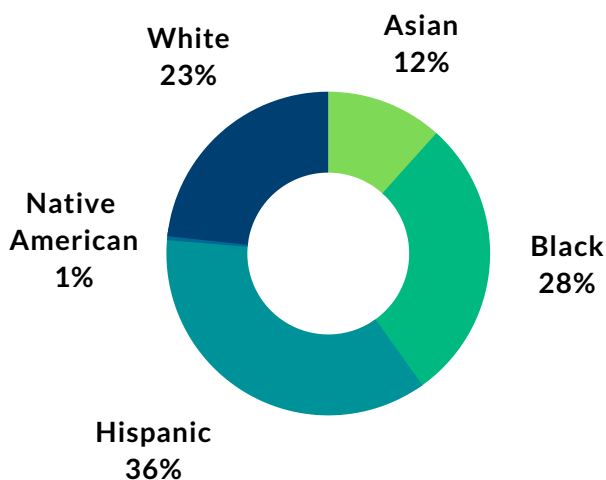
## WHO WE SERVE

CBJC clients who chose to self-report demographic information, identified their place of residence, race and sex/gender as the following:

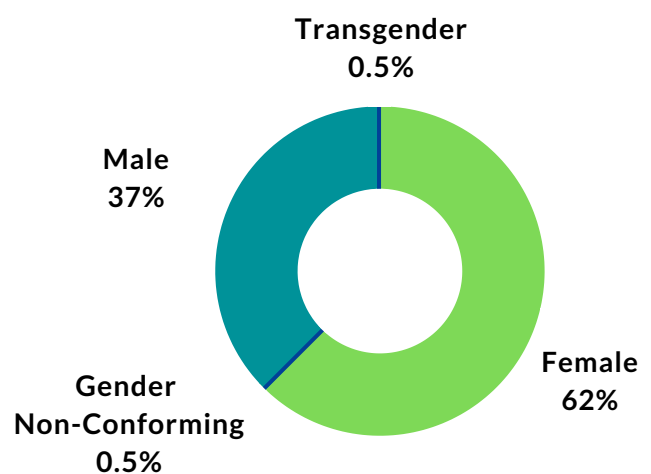
## BY BOROUGH



## RACE



## GENDER/SEX



# IMPACT

## BREAKDOWN OF MOST FREQUENT LEGAL ISSUES ADDRESSED



## FINANCIAL IMPACT

**\$15 M** Leveraged over \$15 million in pro bono legal services

**\$2.7 M** Helped clients directly obtain over \$2.7 million in benefits and monetary awards

**\$4.8 M** Helped clients save \$4.8 million by resolving debt, assisting clients obtain or maintain their housing, employment, and government benefits

## PRO BONO ASSISTANCE PROVIDED

**1,500**

Pro bono cases placed

**2,000**

Attorneys provided pro bono legal assistance

**22,000**

Hours of pro bono service provided

# COVID-19 INITIATIVES



## LEGAL HOTLINE COVID-19 EXPANSION

The City Bar Justice Center's [Legal Hotline](#), the largest operation of its kind in New York, is staffed by attorneys who handle approximately 1,000 calls a month from individuals seeking legal assistance on a wide range of civil legal issues. They provide immediate support through legal advice, information, and referrals. In anticipation of the increased demand for legal assistance during the pandemic, [the Legal Hotline expanded its program](#) and recruited and trained volunteer attorneys to provide New Yorkers with remote support on a range of COVID-19 matters related to unemployment benefits, accessing city courts, housing concerns, and consumer issues. Longstanding pro bono partners were crucial in making the expansion possible, quickly organizing cohorts of attorney volunteers to take referred matters from the Legal Hotline and making themselves available for brief counsel and advice on COVID-19 issues. Additionally, they contributed research and training materials to stay up to date on matters that were rapidly evolving during the pandemic.

## COVID-19 SMALL BUSINESS REMOTE LEGAL CLINIC

During the height of the pandemic, CBJC's [Neighborhood Entrepreneur Law Project](#) (NELP), in partnership with Lawyers for Good Government and Kirkland & Ellis,

launched the [COVID-19 Small Business Remote Legal Clinic](#) to provide immediate relief to small businesses dealing with a range of pandemic-related disruptions. Through this collaborative effort, and with the support of hundreds of attorneys who stepped up to volunteer, the initiative provided thousands of small business owners and entrepreneurs with free legal consultations to understand and act upon opportunities available through federal, state, and local programs as new services and resources became available. NELP volunteer attorneys also provided clients with guidance on broader issues surrounding the pandemic including contract, employment, insurance, and commercial leasing concerns.

## REMOTE LEGAL ASSISTANCE FOR FRONTLINE HEALTHCARE WORKERS

CBJC's [Planning and Estates Law Project](#) (PELP) swiftly addressed life planning legal issues particularly pressing during the pandemic. With the invaluable support of pro bono partners, PELP [launched an initiative](#) to provide free, remote legal assistance to New York City front-line healthcare workers and their families with a range of planning and estates matters, including preparing simple life-planning documents including wills, powers of attorney, designations of standby guardians and health care proxies.

# ADVOCACY

## LEGAL CLINIC FOR THE HOMELESS PANDEMIC & POLICY ADVOCACY

The pandemic worsened profound inequities that exist for New Yorkers disproportionately affected by the City's digital divide and by food, housing, and economic insecurity. Critical services and resources moved online during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, significantly raising the stakes for individuals and families residing in homeless shelters who lack access to reliable Wi-Fi and other essential technology.

In May 2020, the City Bar Justice Center's [Legal Clinic for the Homeless](#), led by Lisa Pearlstein, released a [report](#) (cited in the *New York Times*), documenting the impact of the City's stark digital divide on families with children in homeless shelters and found that only 6% percent of surveyed shelter residents were able to access the internet through their homeless shelter, 67% wanted but had no regular access to Wi-Fi, and 75% agreed that internet access would help improve their living circumstances. The findings of the report, which have been [endorsed](#) by over 30 organizations, fueled a citywide [#Wifi4Homeless advocacy campaign](#) in collaboration with the New York City Bar Association, urging the city to equip homeless shelters with reliable Wi-Fi connections and internet-ready devices.

The consequences of this stark digital divide on the lives of New Yorkers

residing in homeless shelters has been devastating. Individuals and families face barriers to search and apply for permanent housing and jobs, participate in remote schooling, apply for government benefits, stay connected to friends and family, access basic entertainment, or obtain necessary medical care. The [#Wifi4Homeless](#) movement forms part of the City Bar Justice Center's efforts to advance racial justice, as people of color in New York are [disproportionately represented](#) among those experiencing homelessness, with 86% of single adults and 93% of heads-of-household living in homeless shelters identifying as Black or Latinx.

The [#Wifi4Homeless](#) advocacy campaign successfully captured the attention of City and State representatives. Last fall, in response to a citywide movement, the Mayor's Office announced it would install Wi-Fi access in homeless shelters housing school-aged children throughout NYC. The campaign also served as the basis for proposed [State legislation](#), and inspired a class action lawsuit to speed up the installation timeline. While there is more work to be done, the City Bar Justice Center is sustaining its efforts to generate policy change at the city and state level to secure essential technology and reliable internet for New Yorkers residing in homeless shelters.



Despite a bevy of executive orders and legislation providing relief to millions of New Yorkers facing eviction or foreclosure due to the COVID-19 crisis, New York State left uncertain whether the measures taken with respect to evictions and foreclosures would apply to occupants of self-storage facilities. As a result, thousands of New Yorkers unable to pay monthly self-storage facility fees due to financial difficulties caused by the pandemic, faced the loss of their possessions to auction for failure to address storage facility arrears. In response, the Legal Clinic for the Homeless and Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP collaborated on [a memo](#) addressing New York law governing self-storage sales, the uncertain State response on providing relief to self-storage occupants, and arguments for extending the broader pandemic evictions and liens moratorium to self-storage occupants. The publication helped raise awareness on the issue and received [press coverage](#), helping generate important conversations on the issue. Lawmakers thereafter introduced the Pandemic Self-Storage Act.

## **ADVOCATING FOR NEW YORK CITY HOMEOWNERS**

The City Bar Justice Center's [Homeowner Stability Project](#) (HSP) has engaged in direct representation, public education, and law reform work to advocate for individuals and families of limited economic means who possess heirship interests in intergenerationally-owned homes, often in areas of the city with rapidly increasing home values. New Yorkers served by this advocacy – many belonging to communities historically

denied equal access to homeownership benefits due to structural racism in housing and lending policies – otherwise face the loss of longtime family homes (and often substantial home equity) following mortgage and tax lien foreclosure – or, especially, predatory partition actions brought by third-party investors who purchase partial interests in the homes and then sue to force a sale displacing the heir occupants. Awareness of these issues led HSP's director, Scott Kohanowski, to take a leading role in a law reform movement culminating in passage of the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act (UPHPA) in New York State, which expanded legal protections for heirship property owners. HSP also secured several recent legal advocacy wins in partition actions staffed by teams of pro bono attorneys co-counseling with HSP. HSP's volunteer attorneys in two cases have defeated the predatory investors' motions for default and summary judgment for procedural reasons. Though the new UPHPA law does not apply to cases retroactively, in denying the investor plaintiffs' motions in these matters, the court also cited plaintiff's intimidation tactics and defendant's allegations of plaintiff's unclean hands, noting that the enactment of the UPHPA in 2019 expressed the legislature's desire to curb predatory investors' acquisition of heirs-owned properties.

HSP advocacy also recently addressed the fact that an estimated 350,000 co-op units in New York were excluded from COVID Relief Act protections afforded to renters and to owners of condominium units and 1-3 family homes. This disparity in treatment under State law denying



equivalent protections for vulnerable co-op owners has long vexed housing advocates and extends far beyond the issues raised during the pandemic. In February 2021, HSP director Scott Kohanowski [published an article](#) in the New York Law Journal, “*It’s Time to Fix the Co-Op Problem*,” regarding the non-judicial foreclosure process of an HSP client’s co-op apartment, whereby the results of the present legal framework required HSP to commence a lawsuit against a foreclosing lender for failing to engage in adequate loss mitigation prior to disposing of the collateral – co-op shares – that in practical reality represented the client’s home. Following publication of the article, legislation was introduced in Albany to address the disparity.

## **OPPOSING PROPOSED IMMIGRATION REGULATIONS WITH THE AID OF PRO BONO PARTNERS**

The City Bar Justice Center’s [Immigrant Justice Project](#) (IJP), in addition to being a frontline advocate for individual clients, has also opposed a cascade of proposed regulations by the Trump administration that aimed to dismantle and reconfigure the immigration system – changes that would have been devastating particularly to vulnerable immigrant populations. After the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security published proposed regulations upending asylum law and procedure, threatening to make it impossible for most asylum seekers to receive protection in the U.S., IJP, led by director Jennifer Kim, partnered with Willkie Farr and Gallagher LLP to submit a comprehensive [public comment](#). The comments wove together

extensive legislative history and case law, as well as real-life examples detailing how these modifications would adversely affect asylum seekers most in need of counsel and legal representation.

IJP also enlisted the aid of Dechert LLP to submit [public comments](#) in opposition to a new rule that would have authorized invasive biometric data collection, including palm, voice, and iris prints; facial imaging; and DNA from millions of immigrants, as well as their U.S. citizen and legal permanent resident relatives, at the cost of hundreds of millions in taxpayer dollars. The public comment focused on the rule’s disproportionate and harmful impact on children and vulnerable communities served by IJP, namely asylum seekers and survivors of domestic violence, trafficking, and other crimes.

