

2023 Program Outputs: Your Dollars at Work

445

people served by
BLC



\$350,625

In back pay was
awarded thanks to
the work of BLC
advocates



75%

Of BLC's cases
ended in favorable
decisions



OUR TAGLINE **Overcoming economic insecurity through advocacy**



“ DIRECTOR OF LEGAL SERVICES, PETER GRIESER: WHAT INSPIRES ME

I am energized and inspired by the resilience, determination, and generosity of our clients. For them, justice is not a theoretical concept, but a tangible goal. Our clients find space for love and kindness, even in difficult situations, and seek to give that love to others - to their advocates, to their families, to their communities. This unconquerable spirit of caring for each other is what motivates me.

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A letter from the Executive Director



Dear BLC Community,

In the midst of our nation's housing crisis and escalating cost-of-living expenses, few understand these challenges better than our clients who are low-income and living with disabilities. They face the harsh reality of income and housing instability, compounded by unnecessary delays in accessing benefits and navigating bureaucratic hurdles with the Social Security Administration (SSA). Throughout 2023, BLC continued to advocate on behalf of our clients, guiding them through the complex maze of the SSA administrative process, aiming to secure economic stability.

Continuing into 2023, BLC remains a pivotal force within our community, collaborating with our community partners, rallying to serve and champion the needs of our clients, and creating transformative change through advocacy efforts. We maintained a steadfast presence through regular in-person outreach at key partner locations throughout the Puget Sound, including King County Veterans Program, Mary's Place, DESC, Open Doors for Multicultural Families, and Chief Seattle Club. Last year, BLC proudly served over 445 clients, witnessing a notable 40% increase in direct representation cases. These endeavors resulted in significant outcomes, including \$350,625 in backpay awarded, \$87,529 in waived overpayments, and \$20,674 in newly awarded benefits.

In the last year, BLC expanded its impact by providing essential training, consultations, and support to our community partners, social service providers, and fellow legal aid attorneys – empowering them to reach and educate a broader spectrum of clients. We facilitated 15 training sessions, engaging over 615 community members. BLC's commitment extends beyond reactive legal assistance, striving to equip clients with preventive legal education to preemptively address legal issues.

In 2023, we revitalized our volunteer and pro bono attorney program, fostering a spirit of social justice and community engagement. With over 17 volunteers and 3 pro bono attorneys contributing over 846 hours, we bolstered our capacity to serve clients directly, conduct vital legal research, and support fundraising initiatives. Despite challenges – such as the temporary decommissioning of our Justice Bus – plans are underway to reinstate this crucial mobile service in 2024, ensuring accessibility for our clients within our community.

Looking ahead, systemic barriers persist, including inadequate language translation services from the SSA, and the absence of legal counsel for clients with mental health or cognitive disabilities during administrative hearings. As we reflect on our achievements in 2023, we rededicate ourselves to the ongoing fight for economic justice and the enduring stability of all community members. Through your unwavering support and contributions, we can continue to create a future where access to justice is not a privilege, but a fundamental right for all.

Huy Nguyen

Evita Hu

2023 Volunteer of the Year



BLC is bestowing Evita Hu with our 2023 Volunteer of the Year Award because of her dedication, passion, and efforts as a volunteer attorney with our agency over the past year and a half! Evita hails from Beijing and speaks Mandarin. When she arrived in the U.S. with her husband in 2019, she began her journey at Seattle University's School of Law. After a career in Public Relations in Beijing, she was drawn to law school because of her commitment in promoting diversity in the legal system. While in law school, Evita developed a passion for working with the public sector through her first internship with King County's Housing Justice Project. During that time and the pandemic, she had the unique opportunity of learning about the regulations of the emerging housing moratorium; and she gained experience providing free, bilingual legal assistance to renters facing evictions in King County.

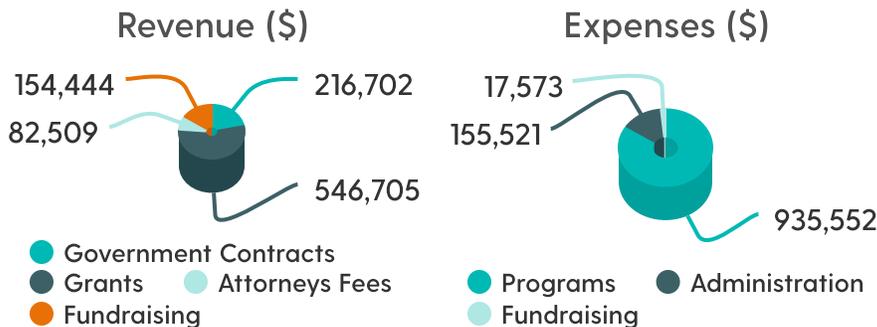
Following law school, Evita furthered her work in the public sector by performing a judicial externship with a judge in King County Superior Court. She volunteered with Asian Bar Association of Washington State to deliver bilingual legal services to low-income communities at the International Legal Clinic.

When her work visa was delayed, she had a chance encounter with one of BLC's attorneys who recruited her to provide pro bono advocacy to our multicultural clients.

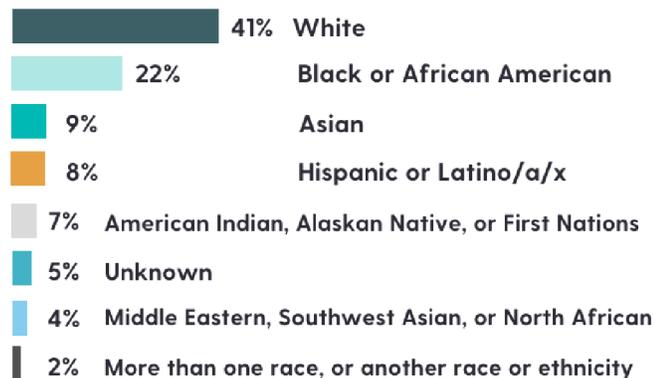
Working under the leadership of BLC's Director of Legal Services, Evita began meeting with our clients in January 2023 where she gets to use her bilingual skills, and all of her culturally appropriate knowledge. Currently, she spends ten hours a week providing virtual legal services to help low-income clients navigate the complicated Social Security system to enroll in or retain their deserved benefits.

When asked why she enjoys working for BLC, Evita said: "I have witnessed the legal challenges faced by underserved populations and the barriers they encounter when seeking legal assistance. Through BLC's clear and compassionate legal work, clients are empowered to understand their rights and legal options, and practical solutions are provided that are tailored to each client's unique situation. Seeing the direct positive impact of BLC on individuals and families reinforced my belief in the power of law to bring positive change to communities."

2023 Financials



2023 Client Demographics



40,000

Individuals in King County experienced homelessness in 2023

51%

Of homeless people in King County identify as having a disability

31%

Of homeless people in King County identify as having a mental health disorder

Vera's Story, Client

Vera's story is one of resilience and strength, illustrating just how vital it is to have a BLC attorney in your corner!

Vera is 61 years old and came to the U.S. as a refugee. She found stable part-employment in the financial industry, and she was able to obtain subsidized housing while she was waiting to be approved for Section 8 Housing. Despite finding part-time employment, Vera experienced mental health disabilities, and has difficulties understanding and remembering information.

With the help of a friend at a local Seattle food bank, Vera was able to

enroll in Social Security Disability Benefits (SSDI). However, she sought the help of our experienced attorneys in late 2022 when SSA abruptly terminated her benefits for allegedly being over-income and assessed her with a \$33,000 overpayment – requiring her to pay it back. At the same time, Vera's loss of monthly income from SSDI created problems with her housing. Our BLC advocates quickly got to work and were able to draft letters to Vera's housing providers explaining the SSA situation to save her housing.

After many more months of waiting, in 2023, our attorneys were able to determine that SSA incorrectly assessed the overpayment and decided that Vera should be receiving her monthly SSDI. Fortunately, we were able to get Vera's monthly government assistance reinstated. We also helped Vera provide the accurate wage information to SSA which resulted in them reassessing the overpayment and concluding that it did not exist, and she does not have to repay it after all. Her \$33,000 debt was completely erased. Not only did Vera achieve a "win" for income through the efforts of her BLC attorneys, but she also got a "win" for stable housing so she is set up for the future.



\$350,625

In back pay was awarded to clients thanks to BLC

\$20,674

benefits awarded to clients in 2023 so people who did not previously have benefits can meet their monthly expenses



PHPDA NIMBLE GRANT TO REPLACE OUR JUSTICE BUS



In April 2023, **Pacific Hospital Preservation & Development Authority (PHPDA)** contributed \$15,000 in Nimble Grant funding to our **Campaign to replace our Justice Bus**, after the original 2018 bus faced irreparable mechanical issues. Our Justice Bus is Washington State's only mobile law office built in the back of a bus that is driven to reach hundreds of clients with disabilities across the Puget Sound. Many of our homeless and low-income clients face multiple barriers to transportation in accessing our office in downtown Seattle. "Meeting clients where they are at" is a driving element of our mission.

PHPDA's grants \$400K annually to a select number of short-term health equity projects across Washington focused on research, piloting ideas, and capacity-building that address the needs of underserved populations. BLC is proud to be a recipient of this funding which will be invested in the purchase of a new, 2023 Mercedes Benz Sprinter Van. It's our goal to get the Justice Bus on the road in the summer of 2024 to reach some of the most marginalized communities that lack access to legal services, including Native/Indigenous tribal members living on/near their reservations, homeless individuals in encampments, and formerly incarcerated people.

300

Hours of pro bono advocacy from volunteer attorneys was gifted to clients

BLC helped

206

people to advocate for themselves in their own cases

People given legal education through community trainings and information fairs

615



\$87,529

in overpayments were reversed or waived thanks to BLC



2023 Equal Justice Work Fellow: Increasing Benefits Access to Multicultural Families with Limited English Proficiency

In September 2023, Seattle University School of Law graduate, Charla Boley, joined BLC as its first Equal Justice Works Fellow, sponsored by DLA Piper and Microsoft. In partnership with nonprofit Open Doors for Multicultural Families (ODMF), Charla’s legal work focuses on providing culturally and linguistically competent legal services and education to immigrants, people of color, and people with disabilities in South King County, Washington. Families of color and immigrants living in South King County experience tremendous barriers to accessing and maintaining Supplemental Security Insurance benefits and other disability benefit programs through the Social Security Administration.

Over the last four months of 2023, Charla met with 20 families to help them with short term and complex Social Security cases. The majority of her clients speak diverse languages including Somali, Amharic, Dari, Spanish, Romanian, Vietnamese, Urdu, Laos, Kurdish, Pashto, Chuukese, Khmer, Russian, Polish, and Tigrinya. Charla is proud to help clients who had their benefits terminated understand what next steps to take to re-instate their benefits. Often times, she helps immigrant clients call their field offices to gain interpreter services and be another voice to help with challenging and nonresponsive representatives. Charla’s project is important to BLC because it empowers families by educating them on the rules and regulations that most impact them, and by assisting them to navigate the Social Security Administration’s complex structure to gain or maintain their benefits income.

In 2024, Charla is planning to offer a know-your-rights workshop for Spanish-speaking families at ODMF, and to start a Social Security legal clinic with pro bono attorneys.

Welcome to New Board Member, Corey Guilmette



As a long-time criminal defense attorney, and the Co-Executive Director of nonprofit, Civil Survival, Corey Guilmette brings a wealth of knowledge to our board in the form of nonprofit law office management, budgeting and financial oversight, strategic planning, and annual fundraising for civil legal aid agencies. Moreover, he has a passion for advocating for oppressed communities in Western Washington to receive SSI and SSDI.

Although we didn’t welcome Corey to our board of directors until late 2023, Corey first became acquainted with BLC’s legal advocacy two years ago. In 2021, Corey was instrumental in connecting with BLC’s Director of Legal Services, Peter Grieser, to help Civil Survival’s formerly incarcerated clients maintain their SSI benefits in the wake of applying for financial refunds from the courts – a complicated system that BLC attorneys understand well. As an attorney, Corey has also spent several years working to leverage anti-attachment protections to protect SSI benefits from criminal legal financial obligation payments. He has brought motions in individual cases and engaged in systemic advocacy.

Additionally, Corey has a very strong personal tie to the disability work of BLC. Corey was in his teens when his father – a beloved high school teacher – was diagnosed with dementia. He saw firsthand how challenging it was for a person struggling with a debilitating disability to navigate the Social Security system to gain adequate benefits.

Looking forward to the future for BLC, Corey says he is most excited to see the Justice Bus get back on the road to continue to increase access to legal services in hard-to-reach communities most marginalized by systems of oppression.

2023 Community Partnerships

- Chief Seattle Club
- Mary's Place
- REACH
- North Shore Senior Center
- DESC
- Northwest Justice Project
- NWIRP
- King County Veteran's Program
- Team Child
- Harborview
- Open Doors for Multicultural Families
- SKCCH
- Solid Ground
- Compass Housing
- Eastside Legal Assistance
- Unemployment Law Program



Save the Date:

REVIVE OUR JUSTICE BUS



Help Us Raise \$40,000 through GiveBIG ♥ 2024 to get our Justice Bus back on the road by Summer 2024!

DONATE

TODAY

Special thanks to our 2023 Sponsors



Click here to Support BLC!

www.benefitslawcenter.org

