
2021 ANNUAL REPORT



Northeast
Legal Aid



Northeast
Justice Center

AN AFFILIATE OF NORTHEAST LEGAL AID

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2021 Annual Report

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Northeast Legal Aid (NLA)—through its board, management, and staff—helps low-income and elderly people of Northeast Massachusetts obtain justice and empowerment through skillful, creative, and persistent advocacy for systemic change and high-quality individual representation.

MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends of Northeast Legal Aid,

It's been another trying year as the pandemic continues to come in waves, impacting our communities in so many ways. Government assistance programs have begun to run out, leaving our vulnerable populations without the help they deserve. In 2021, Northeast Legal Aid experienced an exponential growth in client demand, with client requests increasing by 72%. Housing cases jumped by 87%, unemployment cases were up by 45%, and statewide family law cases increased by 24%. The stories and statistics reflected in this year's annual report will give you a sense of the burdens our residents face and the hard work that the staff at Northeast Legal Aid (NLA) and its subsidiary, Northeast Justice Center (NJC), contribute to the community.

Our work providing eviction defense, assisting victims of domestic violence, helping immigrants, and providing assistance with public benefits have helped our community remain stable during a very difficult time. At the same time, part of our mission is to continually increase the reach and breadth of NLA's services to its community. As a result, in the past year we have opened a new Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) and launched an Environmental Justice Unit. The LITC includes two attorneys assisting with tax controversy, while the Environmental Justice Unit is confronting the social inequalities that low-income communities face when shouldering a disproportionate burden of environmental risk. NLA and NJC are also leading the way on a technology innovation project that will help tenants self-represent in poor housing condition cases in the form of an app titled UpToCode.

With all of the hard work contributed by NLA and NJC staff, we were able to increase our clients served and families helped by 28% in 2021. But there are still many more people we hope to reach. While you're reading this, perhaps you will consider donating as we need your help too – your financial contributions provide direct resources that support those who need it most. Thank you on behalf of all our staff and clients and to all those who have donated and supported us along the way, you are a vital part of Northeast Legal Aid's success.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Weber". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

George K. Weber,
Executive Director

PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

Pandemic related public benefits are running out for most tenants and the eviction moratorium has ended, leaving many renters uncertain about their future. In addition, rents continue to rise as there is less and less affordable housing. As a result, many Northeast Massachusetts residents are left at risk of losing their homes. Middlesex County continues to lead the state in most eviction and non-payment of rent cases, seeing increases of another 5% over the last year. This jump is reflected in the 87% rise in cases served by NLA's Housing Unit this past year.

One case involving a grandmother, her daughter, and two grandchildren, who were served with a "no-cause" eviction, embodies the spirit of NLA's Housing Unit's work.



The tenants had long remained quiet about a nasty rodent infestation, ironically, in fear of being evicted. The infestation got so bad that on a late fall day the family caught 11 rodents.

Yet, as their eviction case was scheduled for a jury trial the week before Christmas – where NLA Special Supervisor for Housing, Paul Collier, represented the clients – the Landlord insisted there was no infestation and that the tenants never reported any problems, as further evidence that he didn't have any obligation to address the problem.

The jury found the infestation to be so bad that the Landlord had breached the covenant of quiet enjoyment, and therefore decided that the Landlord could not evict the family. When the jury announced the verdict, the tenants openly cried as their fear of eviction turned into relief. Now, their focus could shift from where they might be living to celebrating together.



PRESERVING THE LOWELL CANALS

Boott Hydropower, LLC (Boott) is the owner and operator of the 20-megawatt Lowell Hydroelectric Project (the Project), pursuant to a license that was issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (the Commission) in 1983. The Project is located at the Pawtucket Dam on the Merrimack River in the City of Lowell, Massachusetts, and includes a 5.5-mile-long canal system which is a character-defining feature of the Lowell community, and a focal point of much economic development, cultural, and tourism activity in Lowell. The Lowell Canal System was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 as the Locks and Canals Historic District and was critical to the establishment of the Lowell National Historical Park in 1978.

Boott's Project license is scheduled to expire in April 2023, and it is in the process of applying for relicensing of the Project. Its relicensing application however proposes the removal of most of the Lowell Canal System from the Project boundary and the Commission's oversight, which allegedly could affect Lowell's historic landmarks, recreation opportunities, and economy.

NLA and NJC, on behalf of their client, a Lowell resident and environmental community activist, has filed comments in response to Boott's relicensing proposal. The comments advocate for the Commission to maintain the original project boundary, including the Lowell Canal System, which would require Boott to continue maintaining the canals under the Commission's oversight.

As a result of these comments and the comments of other concerned entities and individuals, the Commission recently issued a new Scoping Document, which expands the issues it will consider in conducting its environmental analysis of Boott's relicensing application. These expansions include a consideration of how the proposed removal of the canal system from the Project boundary will affect various resources around the Project area, and how it will affect the City of Lowell's historic landmarks, economy and environmental justice community.

NLA and NJC will continue their zealous advocacy throughout the relicensing process on behalf of their client to ensure that the Lowell Canal system remains in the Project boundary, thereby preserving the City of Lowell's historic landmarks and benefitting its economy and environmental justice community.



Environmental Justice Unit

NLA launched its Environmental Justice Unit in 2021, which sets out to protect our local communities from environmental risks that may harm our residents. Our service area includes three postindustrial cities that face environmental challenges. An Environmental Justice Community (EJC) is composed predominately of people of color and low-income residents that live close to environmental hazards. 89% of Lowell residents reside in an EJC, as well as 93% of Lynn residents, and 100% of Lawrence residents.

THE POWER OF THE ATTORNEY

A prolonged illness is incredibly stressful, but for the Justice Center's client, Lisa, her illness resulted in a loss of her social security income (SSI), creating an impossible living situation. For those living on a fixed income, a reduction in benefits can lead to an eviction, food insecurity, or the inability to pay for basic human needs.

Late last fall, Lisa was sent a letter of termination regarding her Supplemental Security Income payments. Not only was she charged with an overpayment, but her benefits were dropped from approximately \$700 a month, to approximately \$30. The letter had been sent in response to Lisa's recent hospitalization.



Over the last several months, however, Lisa had been trying to contact her case worker to explain why her hospitalization did not fall under a category that would result in a benefit reduction or charge. After many efforts, she was never able to reach anyone.

Not able to resolve the situation on her own, Lisa then contacted NLA offices where her case was assigned to NLA's subsidiary, the Northeast Justice Center, and the Justice Center's Benefits Unit Staff Attorney, Emily Zagorski. Emily obtained the necessary medical discharge paperwork, pulled relevant social security regulations, connected with the case worker, and submitted on behalf of the client an explanation as to why this hospitalization should not result in a benefit reduction.

As a result, the SSI benefits increased back to their original value and Lisa was compensated for the underpayment that occurred over the period her benefits were reduced. Back at her previous benefit levels, Lisa is now able to live her life without added worry.



A FAIR CHANCE AT LIFE

Shortly after arriving in the U.S from Guatemala with her young daughter, Adriana fainted at work and was rushed to the hospital. After a series of tests and painful diagnostic procedures, Adriana was diagnosed with terminal renal disease, both of her kidneys had failed.

Meanwhile, Adriana and her daughter were facing deportation to Guatemala, where Adriana would not be able to continue receiving the medical treatment she needed to stay alive and support her daughter. With the support of New England Justice for Our Neighbors, the Northeast Justice Center was able to change Adriana's life.

Adriana's New England JFON-supported attorney at the Northeast Justice Center, Adelina Janiak, advocated on her behalf for several months, until the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agreed to dismiss the deportation case against Adriana and her young daughter. DHS was asked to exercise its prosecutorial discretion in light of Adriana's unique and tragic circumstances.

Thanks to the great work of New England JFON and the Justice Center, Adriana can focus on her health as well as her daughter. Adriana said, "your office, your work and your help, and you as a person, have been the best I could hope to find in the course of time to fight my case."

TAXPAYER RESCUE

Letters from the IRS are stressful for anyone. But when you are a low-income earner and a first-generation citizen overcoming language barriers, the complexity of the US tax system can be overwhelming. Northeast Legal Aid's (NLA) Lowell based client, Amara, opened a letter from the IRS and saw that she was being assessed for a tax well over her annual income, causing her to panic. Fortunately, NLA's recently formed Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic offers assistance with income tax disputes ranging from tracking down a missing refund to disputing IRS assessments in US Tax Court. In this case, Staff Attorney, Yale Robinson, worked alongside Clinic Director, Mel Jiganti, and quickly filed a case in Tax Court.



Amara was issued an IRS notice of deficiency telling her she owed over \$130,000. Previously, Amara had sold her home and made very little money over what she had paid for the house. Viewing the sale as a wash, she did not report the house sale on her taxes. Unfortunately, the IRS saw record of the sale and took the position that every dollar of the sale price was profit and therefore income.

In working with the client, Mel and Yale successfully demonstrated that the IRS had undervalued their client's investment in the house by over \$120,000. Further, Northeast Legal Aid's LITC attorneys proved that the house was her personal residence and that the tax code allowed homeowners to exclude some profits from the sale of the client's residence. These two factors reduced the applicable tax by over \$100,000. The case settled in the U.S Tax Court on favorable terms, and Amara's tax burden was drastically reduced to only \$4,500.



PRO BONO APPRECIATION

Caption: NLA attorneys work alongside Fish & Richardson Pro Bono attorneys at our Lawyer for a Day Program, providing same-day assistance to those at risk of losing their home.

Northeast Legal Aid would like to thank all our dedicated and hardworking pro bono volunteers that have helped us throughout the year and provided over 1,600 hours of service.

Your efforts are deeply appreciated and more important than ever as the country and region deal with an unprecedented increase in demand. Pro Bono attorneys have become all the more essential to maximizing our reach and will continue to play an integral part in NLA's success.

[Learn about volunteering](#)

ANNUAL THANK YOU EVENT

In order to formally thank our pro bono attorneys, NLA hosted a Volunteer Appreciation Event in October of 2021 that featured a live presentation from State Senator Jamie Eldridge as well as a video from Senator Elizabeth Warren. A special thank you was given to law firms Fish & Richardson, Nelson Mullins, and DLA Piper, for their continued support and volunteer efforts.



NELSON
MULLINS



72% Increase

Client Requests

2,410

2,017

Cases Opened Cases Closed

8,273

3,462

People Helped Cases Served

*Including Household members

 **28%**

**INCREASE IN CASES SERVED
AND PEOPLE HELPED**

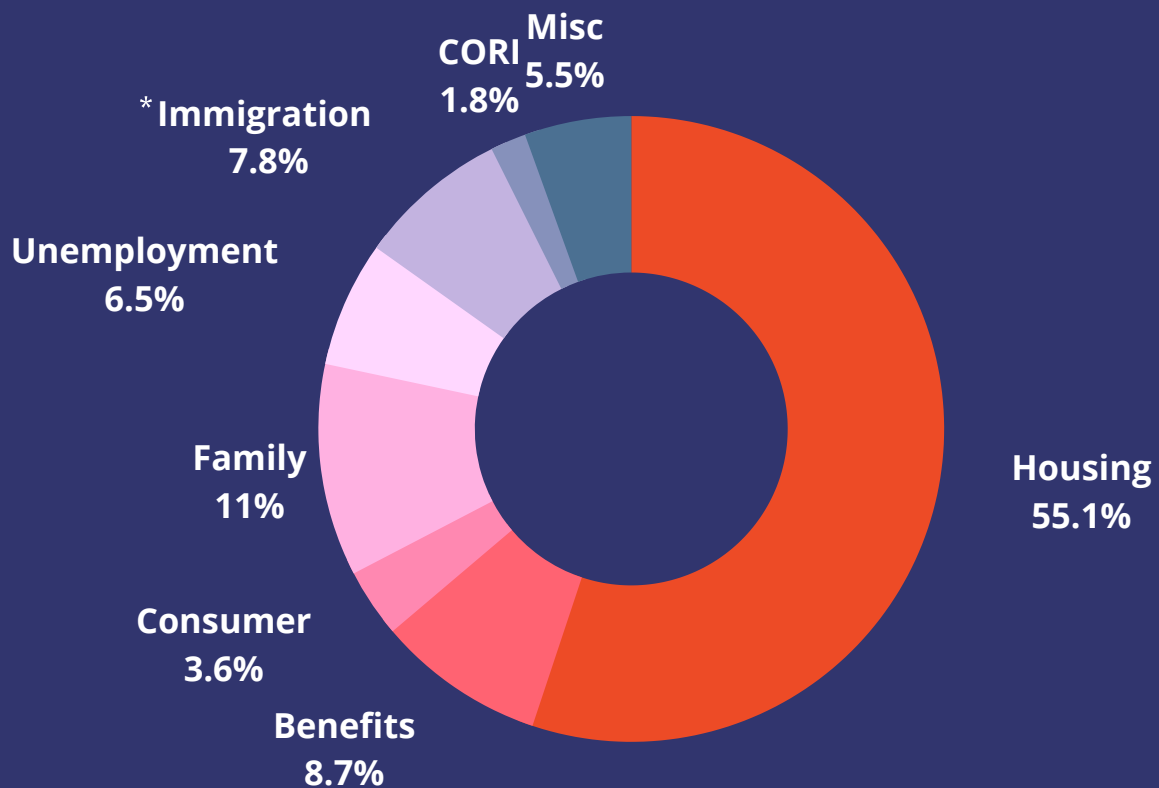
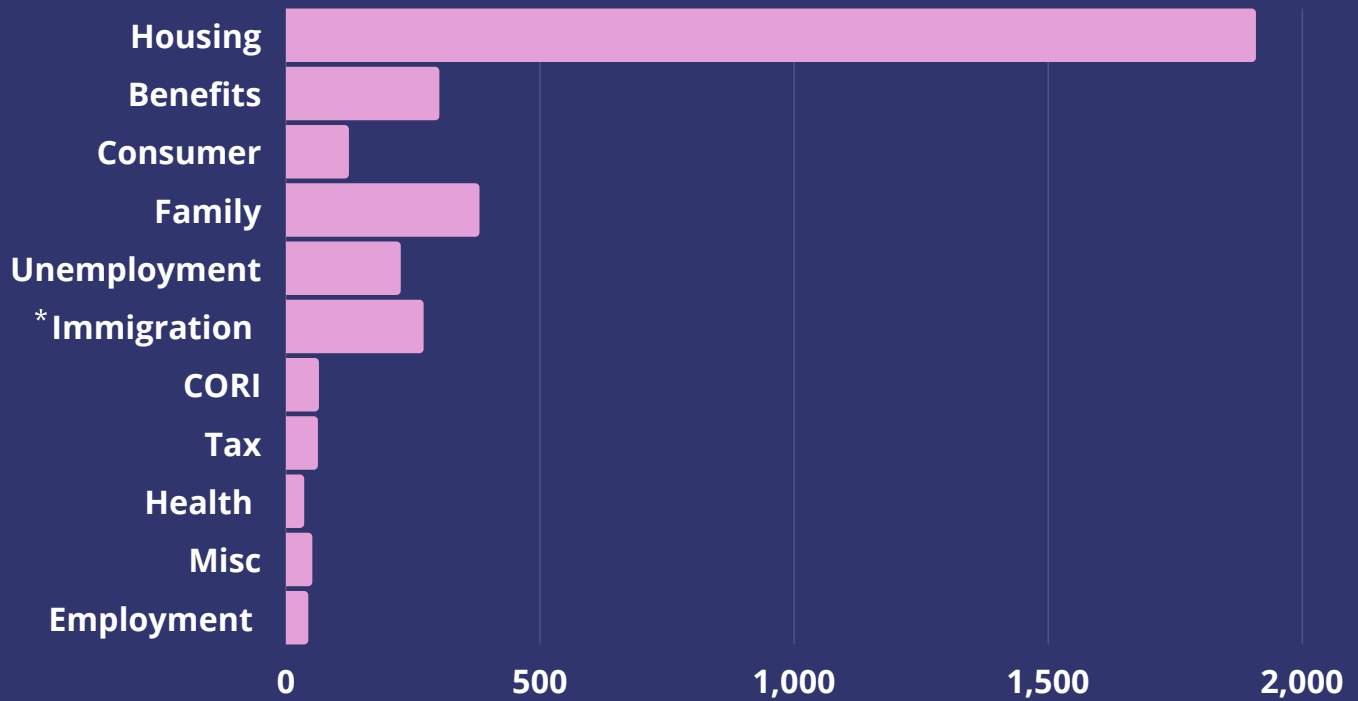
2021 Volunteer Hours

5,428 NLA Non-Attorney Hours

1,335 NJC Non-Attorney Hours

6,736 Total Non-Attorney Hours

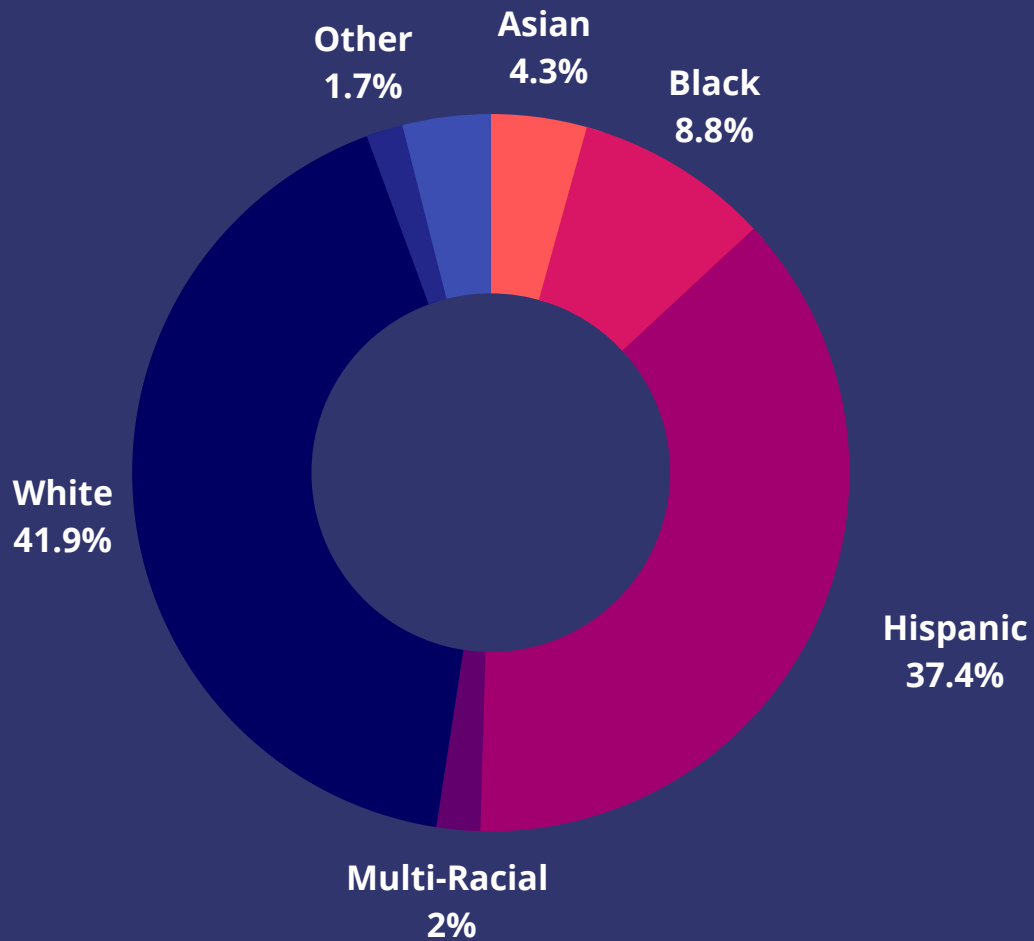
Practice Areas



*all immigration cases are served by NLA's subsidiary, the Northeast Justice Center

Demographics

Race/Ethnicity



Gender

68%	31%	1%
Female	Male	Other

Age

3%	76%	20%	1%
0-17	18-59	60+	Unknown

ANNUAL BUDGET

Revenue

Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation	\$6,921,590
Legal Services Corporation	\$1,094,048
Government Grants	\$775,814
Foundation Grants	\$388,399
Private Fundraising	\$31,653
Attorney Fees	\$457,260
Other Income	\$3,102
Revenue Before Donated Services	\$9,671,868
Donated Services	\$525,000
Total Revenue After Donated Services	\$10,196,868

Expenses

Personnel	\$7,409,532
Occupancy	\$367,723
Operations	\$239,697
Library & Litigation	\$81,521
Contract Services	\$142,704
Expenses Before Donated Services	\$8,241,177
Donated Services	\$525,000
Revenue After Donated Services	\$8,766,177
CHANGE IN NET ASSET	\$1,430,691

FUNDERS

Thank you! Northeast Legal Aid would like to extend its appreciation to all of our generous funders and supporters.





A BIG THANKS TO...



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