



MLRI MASSACHUSETTS
LAW REFORM
INSTITUTE

Advocacy in Action

Annual Report 2024

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Letter to Supporters

The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute fundamentally believes in the power of the law to achieve justice on a societal level, and to defend our most vulnerable populations. Government can and should be a place where people come together and reflect our collective goodwill so that no one gets left behind.

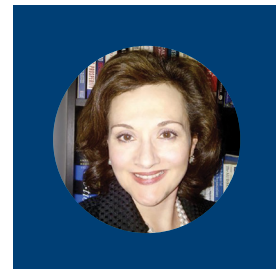
We are currently witnessing a convergence of crises that test the resilience of our communities. We know that poverty is a policy choice and that we are stronger together. But improving and even upholding the law is never easy. Those in power continue to capitalize on inequality and take advantage of a historically inaccessible system for their own gain. As a result, these inequities only divide us. It is in times like these that the work of MLRI becomes not just important, but imperative.

For almost sixty years, MLRI has brought our many advocacy strategies to bear, leveraging our expertise and experience to affect meaningful change. Whether it is by utilizing impact litigation to vindicate the rights of parents to keep families together, advocating at the legislative and budget level to ensure everyone has access to the legal representation they need to stay in their homes, or providing substantive expertise and actionable steps to frontline advocates to help clients solve civil legal problems, we employ every tool at our disposal to address the pressing needs of low-income families throughout Massachusetts. In this annual report, you'll read stories about how we've utilized those various tools to achieve success over the past year, and we will introduce you to six award-winning MLRI advocates who strive every day to fulfill the promise of justice.

Our work is far from over. As we look ahead, we must remain resolute in our pursuit of a more just and equitable society. The challenges we face are daunting, but I am heartened by the dedication of our supporters and inspired by the courage of those experiencing poverty and injustice striving for a better life. Together, we can create a future where every individual has the opportunity to live in dignity and to thrive. One where we truly use the power of law to fulfill the promise of justice.



Georgia D. Katsoulomitis
Executive Director



MLRI at a Glance



MISSION

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) is a nonprofit poverty law and policy center. It provides **statewide advocacy and leadership** in advancing laws, policies, and practices that **secure economic, racial, and social justice for low-income people and communities**.

MLRI furthers its systems-change mission through various strategies: impact litigation, legislative and administrative advocacy, coalition-building, community lawyering, and public information. All of MLRI's advocacy incorporates a racial equity lens and a community-driven framework that centers the voices and experiences of people with lived experience of poverty and racial injustice in our work.

MLRI also serves as the poverty law support center for the Massachusetts civil legal aid delivery system and advocacy community. Our advocates provide substantive poverty law expertise and support to local legal aid programs, social services, health care and human service providers, and community organizations that serve low-income people throughout the state.



ADVOCACY AREAS

HOUSING

We work with tenants, community groups, legal aid advocates, policymakers, and a broad range of organizations to strengthen the rights of tenants, prevent displacement of low-income residents, and advance healthy, safe, and affordable housing for all.

IMMIGRATION

We secure and defend the social and economic rights of low-income immigrants, addressing unfair and discriminatory policies as well as protecting eligibility and access to critical safety net programs.

INCOME SUPPORTS AND PUBLIC BENEFITS

We tackle systemic barriers that prevent low-income families, children, seniors, and people with disabilities from accessing essential support and income stabilization.

HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

We use legal and policy advocacy to alleviate food insecurity and hunger in Massachusetts by increasing SNAP participation and benefits amounts.

HEALTH CARE

We ensure that all low-income and vulnerable individuals and families have access to affordable, high-quality, and equitable health care.

RACIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE

We identify issues impacting the state's communities of color and devise strategies, in collaboration with communities, to diminish systemic barriers and promote equal rights and equal opportunities.

CHILD WELFARE

We advance policies and practices that are family-centered and achieve outcomes most favorable for low-income children and families.

CIVIL LEGAL AID FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

We co-lead the statewide legal aid initiative created in 2017 to increase access to civil legal services for vulnerable crime victims.

FAMILY LAW AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

We protect domestic violence survivors and their children when they must interact with the court system and state agencies.

LANGUAGE ACCESS

We improve language access for people who are best served in a language other than English and Deaf/Hard of Hearing people in the courts, government agencies, schools, and other institutions.



Websites Project

Launched in 2005, the Massachusetts Legal Aid Websites Project is a special statewide initiative funded by the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC). The Websites Project is developed and maintained by MLRI and provides online legal information and other resources to the general public and to the Massachusetts advocacy community.

The Websites Project is comprised of five statewide websites. [MassLegalServices.org](https://www.masslegalservices.org) provides information and resources for frontline legal aid advocates and [MassLegalHelp.org](https://www.masslegalthelp.org) is a public-facing website that provides reliable and easily-understandable information about critical legal issues that affect low-income people.

The Websites Project also oversees the Legal Resource Finder ([masslrf.org](https://www.masslrf.org)), the Massachusetts legal services triage and online referral portal; Mass Legal Answers Online ([mass.freelegalanswers.org](https://www.mass.freelegalanswers.org)), an innovative virtual legal helpline to provide targeted legal advice to low-income people; and [MassProBono.org](https://www.massprobono.org), an online resource that connects programs with pro bono attorneys.

A Year of Impact

An Act to Prevent Abuse and Exploitation

In 2024, Massachusetts became the seventh state in the nation to recognize coercive control as a harmful form of domestic abuse by passing An Act to Prevent Abuse and Exploitation. Coercive control is a pattern of deliberate behavior used by an abuser to restrict their victim's safety and autonomy. Abuse comes in many forms—psychological, financial, legal, technological, sexual, and physical. By expanding legal protections for victims, the law can halt the escalation and generational harm caused by coercive control and stop abuse before it accelerates. MLRI, in partnership with the Together Rising Against Coercion (TRAC) Coalition, led the charge in advocating for this critical legislation, ensuring that coercive control is finally recognized as the harmful and insidious form of abuse that it is.

An Act to Improve Quality and Oversight of Long-Term Care

MLRI's Health Law Unit secured a major victory for elderly individuals and people with disabilities, with An Act to Improve Quality and Oversight of Long-Term Care now codified into law. This new law significantly limits MassHealth's aggressive estate recovery practices, a process by which the health insurer pursued reimbursement for services from the estates of MassHealth members after they die. This Act restricts the types of expenses that can be recovered and also removes estate recovery for individuals with disabilities enrolled in MassHealth's CommonHealth program, addressing years of advocacy for reform. This change ensures MassHealth recovery can no longer go above and beyond federal guidelines and brings Massachusetts practices in line with the majority of other states.

12,400

Massachusetts families who were victims of SNAP theft and received replacement benefits between October 2023 and March 2024.

1.9M

Pageviews on MassLegalHelp.org in the past year.

16,386

Legal aid community and advocacy partners who attended one of our 100+ substantive training sessions.

1,000

Pieces of legal content that were reviewed and revised by subject matter experts for the MassLegalHelp.org redesign.

29,500

Older adults and people with disabilities that benefited from monthly EAEDC/cash assistance increases.

700+

Mothers on MassHealth supported by a doula during labor because of MassHealth's coverage of doula services.

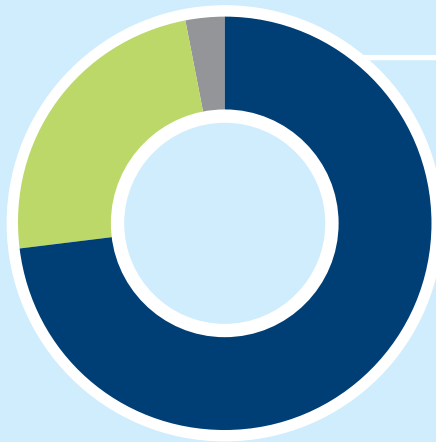
43,000

Families, including roughly 64,000 children, that benefitted from monthly cash assistance increases in 2024.

Financials

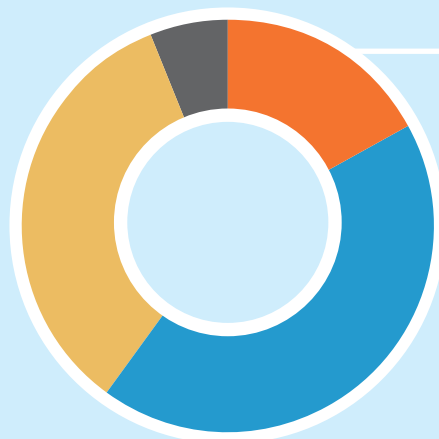
SOURCES OF FUNDS

Grants	\$7,794,865
Contracts	\$1,193,455
Other Sources	\$261,456
Interest Income	\$231,520
Fundraising & Donations	\$187,155
Donated Services	\$144,941
TOTAL INCOME	\$9,813,392



Use of Funds by Functional Category

- **73.1%** Programmatic Expenses
- **24.1%** Administrative Expenses
- **2.8%** Fundraising Expenses



Use of Funds by Expense Category

- **67.5%** Employee Compensation & Benefits
- **16.8%** Professional Services & Other
- **13.4%** Occupancy
- **2.3%** Donated Services

Legislative & Budget Advocacy

01

Access to Counsel in Evictions Represents a Crucial Investment in Housing Justice

At the core of what we do at MLRI is the strategic effort to influence legislation and government budget decisions, ensuring policies address the needs of marginalized communities and resources are allocated to support them. Our budget advocacy works to secure and increase funding for social programs, public benefits, and legal aid that protect low-income individuals' rights and improve access to essential services. Even the best policy solutions will fail without adequate resources to see them realized.

For Annette Duke, Senior Housing Attorney at MLRI, 'advocacy' has always meant that all people, regardless of race or income, are granted equal protections under the law. Following that belief, Access to Counsel (ATC), a program that Annette has pioneered over the past decade, combats a fundamental inequity between tenants and landlords. The Massachusetts Trial Court reported that in non-payment cases in Housing Court, while 90% of landlords were represented, only 3.5% of tenants had legal representation. Without representation, tenants are left defenseless in the complicated world of Massachusetts Housing Court.

Access to Counsel provides lawyers for low-income tenants facing eviction, an investment proven to decrease housing instability and homelessness. Data reveals a stark and troubling reality in Massachusetts: 11% percent of all children under the age of 5 face eviction each year, an extreme disruption in their lives. The impact is even more severe on Black children – a staggering 27% of Black children under the age

of 5 experience eviction annually, nearly three times the national average. The consequences of these evictions extend beyond the loss of shelter; studies show the instability created from eviction contributes to decreased engagement in school and higher dropout rates, as well as significant repercussions on an individual's physical and mental health.

Over the course of nearly a decade, MLRI, in partnership with the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) and a coalition of more than 240 partner organizations, led the charge to find sponsors for an ATC bill, coordinate testimony in legislative hearings, deliver letters of support to the Governor and state budget office, and press for media coverage in support of the proposal. This past July, the coalition celebrated a significant victory; based on the recommendation of both the House and Senate, the Governor signed the FY25 budget which included \$2.5 million to establish an Access to Counsel pilot program, administered through MLAC.

This long-overdue intervention will be a significant step forward for housing justice and equity, providing tenants with a level playing field.



ANNETTE DUKE

2024 John G. Brooks Legal
Services Award, Boston Bar
Association

This year, Annette was recognized with the Boston Bar Association's esteemed John G. Brooks Award for her fervent advocacy and commitment to justice. It is an award intended to honor a champion of legal services for the economically-disadvantaged.

Annette has been on the front lines for housing justice since her law school days, where she worked representing tenants with a local housing clinic and never looked back. Now a senior housing attorney at MLRI, she fights for tenants' rights, public housing, and court reform across Massachusetts, viewing her work as a long-term commitment to justice rather than a series of short-term victories.

Over the course of her time at MLRI, Annette has played a pivotal role in campaigns like Housing Court 4 All, which expanded access to housing courts in previously underserved communities. She is also a strong advocate for tenants facing public housing redevelopment, working closely with grassroots organizations like the Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants. But it was the success of the Access to Counsel effort that earned her the BBA recognition this year.

Annette's ultimate goal is to make housing a human right, a cause she has never stopped fighting for.



"Legal representation is a lifeline for tenants facing eviction. We look forward to building a sustainable program that not only provides Access to Counsel but also addresses systemic inequities through budget allocations and strategic policy changes."

02

Coalition Building

Mass Speaks Coalition Reshapes Language Policy Through Collaborative Change

Lasting change is rarely achieved alone; it is the result of collective action and collaboration across diverse groups working toward shared goals. Coalitions are a crucial element of effective advocacy, as they bring together legal aid organizations, community groups, service providers, and other allies to amplify individual efforts and strengthen collective impact. Each partner contributes unique insights and priorities, and through coordinated action, their combined knowledge and drive can lead to meaningful change.

MLRI's Statewide Language Access Attorney, Iris Coloma-Gaines, is one of the leaders of Mass Speaks - a coalition of more than 60 organizations from across the state working to pass the Language Access and Inclusion Act, which would address language barriers at state agencies.

With the nation's third-largest Haitian population and second-largest Brazilian population, many people from diverse backgrounds call Massachusetts home. Nearly 1 in 4 residents

in Massachusetts is best served in a language other than English, with over 850,000 individuals aged five and older identifying as Limited English Proficient (LEP). Yet our Commonwealth's services and information are overwhelmingly English-only, effectively denying hundreds of thousands of families access to critical state resources. People depend on state agencies to address all kinds of needs and challenges - from applying for unemployment assistance, to keeping food on the table and staving off an eviction, to navigating the complexities of the child welfare system.

The Mass Speaks Coalition is working to address this inequity by standardizing language access policies and practices at public-facing state agencies to ensure all residents have equal access to the information they need. Building on the momentum of an Executive Order signed by Governor Healey in the Fall of 2023 mandating state agencies to develop Language Access Plans, the Language Access and Inclusion Act supported by the Coalition would further strengthen language access across all of state government. From immigrant advocacy groups to legal service providers and healthcare organizations, each member of the coalition brings something critical to the table. Service providers identified practical barriers LEP individuals face accessing state resources; legal aid organizations clarified the legal framework around language access and discrimination; and community groups connected with impacted residents to amplify their voices. The broad base of support helped shape a more comprehensive piece of legislation and secured greater public and political attention to the issue.

By harnessing diverse perspectives, resources, and influence, these collaborations create a powerful force for addressing complex societal challenges.

“Together, we can break down barriers and make sure everyone – regardless of language or background – gets the access and opportunities they deserve.”

IRIS COLOMA-GAINES

2024 Access to Justice Award for Race, Equity & Inclusion, Mass Bar Foundation

In June 2024, Iris Coloma-Gaines was the recipient of the Massachusetts Bar Foundation’s Access to Justice Award for Race, Equity & Inclusion. This award is given to an attorney who has pursued zealous advocacy framed with a race, equity, and inclusion lens; an individual whose work includes a strategy that advances critical race theory, including the impact of individual and structural racism.

Iris is a passionate and steadfast advocate who works tirelessly to ensure that all individuals in Massachusetts have access to the same opportunities and protections. Her advocacy focuses on removing language barriers that impede people from accessing vital services in courts, state agencies, schools, and hospitals so that no one is disadvantaged simply because of the language they speak or the community they come from. She has also been active in the fight for fair wages and better working conditions for the state’s farmworker community, a group often overlooked in discussions about workers’ rights.

Whether she’s championing fair treatment for marginalized groups or pushing for systemic reforms, Iris remains dedicated to creating a more inclusive and just society where every voice is heard and every individual has the opportunity to thrive.



03 Impact Litigation

MLRI Challenges the System to Secure Fair Hearings in DCF Cases

The intersection of advocacy and legal action holds the key to dismantling systemic barriers and fostering a brighter future. Through strategic legal advocacy, we confront structural issues and challenge unfair practices that perpetuate inequality. But litigation and the court system are vital instruments in the fight against poverty and injustice, offering a pathway for individuals and communities to assert their rights and seek meaningful change when advocacy alone is not enough.

At MLRI, rather than take on individual caseloads, we initiate class action suits and other impact litigation that harness the power of the legal system to broadly benefit low-income people and communities. Each case we take on not only addresses immediate concerns but also creates precedents that can benefit others in the future, amplifying the collective voice of those we serve – and our impact.

When MLRI Senior Child Welfare Attorney, Susan Elsen, learned that a particular group of parents were being denied due process in their involvement with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF), she sprang into action. Finding reinforcements in Brown Rudnick’s pro bono team, Susan and a team led by partner Shari Dvoskin discovered that since 2015, DCF had been placing some investigated parents into a new category of case labeled “substantiated concern,” a classification which limited options to appeals and a fair hearing. Fair hearings allow parents to challenge DCF’s evidence, present witnesses, and have a neutral party decide the

outcome – a process that often results in success keeping families together.

Ultimately, Brown Rudnick and MLRI obtained a favorable ruling for children and families in the suit filed against DCF. A Superior Court justice found that DCF had violated the due process rights of a mother when it denied her the right to a fair hearing to challenge DCF’s finding of a “substantiated concern” that she had neglected her child.

DCF disproportionately interacts with Black, Latinx, Native American, and low-income families, many of whom lack legal representation, leaving them vulnerable to rights violations by the agencies meant to assist them. This case was won on the principle that parents have a constitutionally protected right to raise their children, a right often recognized in privileged communities but frequently denied to low-income families and families of color.

The courts sided with fairness – ensuring DCF is not unjustly separating families. A legal win such as this one set precedent for future cases that could potentially deny low-income families of their rights to privacy and due process.



SUSAN ELSEN

2023 Lawyer of the Year,
Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly

Following this significant legal victory, MLRI's Susan Elsen, alongside her co-counsel, Shari Dwoskin, were named Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly's Lawyers of the Year. This esteemed award celebrates the exceptional work of attorneys who have made a profound impact on the legal community and their clients in the Commonwealth.

Throughout her career, Susan has dedicated herself to advocating for children and families, with a particular focus on child custody and child welfare issues. Her tireless work has been driven by a commitment to ensuring that children grow up in safe, financially stable homes that provide the necessary foundation for a healthy and productive adulthood. Susan's deep-rooted passion for legal aid has shaped her career, leading her to consistently fight for the rights and well-being of vulnerable populations.

After a lifetime of service in the legal aid community, Susan retired from MLRI in 2024, leaving behind a remarkable legacy of advocacy and service to those in need - the latest victory against DCF serving as a fitting capstone to her time at the organization. Her contributions to children and family law have left a lasting impact on the Massachusetts legal landscape.

"I am heartened that the courts have recognized how serious of an injustice this was to families; it is a reminder that through the courts, we can set new precedents, and defend the fundamental rights of those who are often overlooked."



04 Community Lawyering

MLRI's Approach to Housing Justice is Community-Led & Community-Served

If there's anything that's certain about the housing crisis in Massachusetts, it is that it is a multifaceted problem that requires a multifaceted solution. Rent control, access to counsel in eviction proceedings, transfer fees, increased investment in public housing – all of these policies will contribute to housing justice, but none of them can get us there alone.

That's why MLRI's housing advocates are focused on building momentum on a comprehensive housing justice platform – a variety of policies, values-based and identified by communities across the state, that can be pushed simultaneously and synchronously. The housing crisis isn't experienced by people as discrete problems, but as an all-encompassing deluge that keeps housing stability always out of reach. Community lawyering requires foregrounding that perspective – the perspective of those most impacted by a problem – and forging policies and strategies that work best for those communities.

MLRI's Housing Unit works with a multitude of different grassroots housing groups across the state, from other nonprofits to tenant unions to community-based organizations, and everything in between. While MLRI advocates offer guidance on bill drafting and strategy based on their expertise, decision-making ultimately remains with the grassroots groups. This approach enables the progress of more equitable and effective policies that address

community needs, while empowering grassroots leaders. Without the voices of community groups such as Massachusetts Union of Public Tenants, Homes for All Massachusetts, La Colaborativa, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, and so many more, the impact of MLRI's work would not be as significant.

The team's achievements are not merely the result of a single year's work, but of long-standing relationships and their ability to tackle emerging challenges while maintaining focus on long-term solutions for housing justice. When the Massachusetts Emergency Assistance Shelter System found itself under fire this summer, MLRI's housing advocates did not abandon their broader responsibilities. Instead, they continued their advocacy, working to demonstrate that the shelter system is just one part of a much larger issue, all interconnected with the ongoing housing crisis.

That's community lawyering at its core – an approach that rejects viewing problems and solutions in isolation, embracing instead a broader perspective that not only aligns with the reality of the housing crisis but also better supports the communities at the forefront of the movement. In this approach, success is seen not as an endpoint, but as a motivation to continue the work into tomorrow, next month, next year, and beyond.

MARK MARTINEZ

2024 ALX100, Amplify LatinX

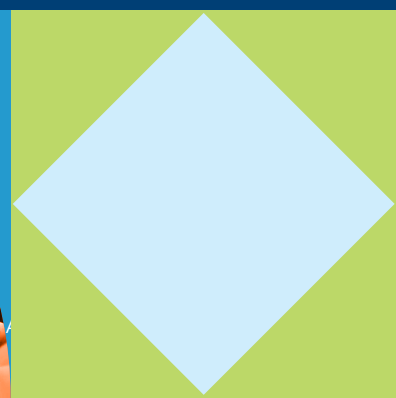
This fall, MLRI Housing Staff Attorney, Mark Martinez was named to the Amplify LatinX ALX100 List – a cohort of 100 exceptional Latine leaders from across the Commonwealth.

Mark is at the center of the housing justice conversation – specifically the battle for rent control and a real estate transfer fee. After spending years focusing on housing justice within the Massachusetts State House walls, Mark knows just how important affordable housing is to economic stability and growth for families. His deep understanding of the legislative process, combined with his unwavering commitment to housing justice, allows him to navigate complex political landscapes while keeping the focus on long-term solutions.

A fearless and outspoken advocate, Mark has become a leading voice in pushing for policies that prioritize the needs of low-income and marginalized communities. Mark has built strong coalitions, worked relentlessly to amplify the voices of those most affected by the housing crisis, and used his position to challenge the power structures that perpetuate inequality in housing. His leadership continues to be instrumental in advancing MLRI's initiatives and priorities, while striving for a future where affordable housing is accessible to all.



“Community lawyering means relying on the leadership of the most impacted people. Only by doing that can we craft and advance the comprehensive policy solutions that are needed to tackle the many policy failures that cause housing instability and homelessness.”



Administrative Advocacy

05

MLRI Ensures Access by Simplifying Public Benefits Through Administrative Reform

Since our founding, MLRI's commitment to advocating with lawmakers has resulted in scores of legislative wins that protect and benefit low-income people. But the passage of good policy is not enough to guarantee positive outcomes – how these laws are implemented and administered determines their success.

That's why MLRI, armed with a deep understanding of complex bureaucratic systems, also advocates with state and federal agencies to cut red-tape and tackle systemic barriers that prevent low-income people from connecting to the programs they are eligible for. Working with various coalitions, community partners, and legislators, our Economic Justice Unit has achieved immense success in pushing for administrative practices that optimize public benefits.

Over the years, MLRI has spearheaded the charge to increase participation rates in critical programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by streamlining requirements to access public benefits. Each additional form, application fee, or interview is another barrier that prevents low-income individuals and families from utilizing benefits that are in place to assist them. MLRI's advocacy helped secure a simplified "SNAP checkbox" on the MassHealth application allowing low-income residents to apply for food benefits at the same time as renewing their health coverage. After working with the Healey administration to implement this common application, between June 2023 thru May 2024, over 92,000

MassHealth applications were filed with the SNAP box checked, with more than 50% approved. That translates to approximately \$150M to \$180M in annual federal SNAP to support Massachusetts families.

Our Economic Justice Unit's advocacy also helped protect SNAP benefits last year. Since summer 2022, thousands of families have had their food benefits stolen through no fault of their own due to organized card-skimming schemes and other types of electronic theft thanks to outdated technology that leaves EBT cards vulnerable to thieves. Thanks in part to MLRI's leadership in pushing Congress to authorize federal replacement as well as local and national advocacy to set up simple, accessible procedures to access replacement, as of June 2024, the Massachusetts SNAP agency had used federal dollars to replace about \$7 million in stolen SNAP benefits for about 15,500 households across the Commonwealth.

By consistently pushing for improvements and holding agencies accountable, MLRI's advocates make sure that the voices of those most affected by these policies are heard and represented in the decision-making process. With continued legislative and administrative advocacy and community support, there is hope for a future where every resident of the Commonwealth has the resources they need to live a healthy, secure life.



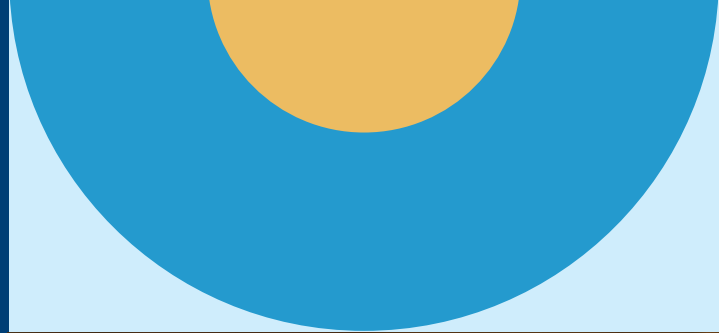
PAT BAKER

2024 Public Citizen of the Year,
National Association of Social
Workers MA Chapter

This year, Senior Policy Advocate Pat Baker was honored with the Public Citizen of the Year Award from the National Association of Social Workers Massachusetts Chapter, a testament to her lifelong commitment to social justice. For over four decades, Pat has been at the forefront of efforts to improve access to essential public benefits, such as SNAP, cash assistance, and protections for immigrants and homeless populations. Her in-depth knowledge of the system and strategic leadership have played a crucial role in reversing the Commonwealth's historically low SNAP participation rate and in increasing access to public benefits for those in need.

Pat's advocacy is defined by her unwavering dedication to dismantling barriers that prevent people from accessing the support they need to thrive. She has consistently worked to ensure that all individuals—regardless of immigration status or background—have the opportunity to access life-sustaining resources.

Rooted in her conviction that systemic change is essential for building a just society, Pat's work continues to make a significant impact in Massachusetts. Through her efforts, Pat is helping to shape a future where every individual, regardless of their circumstances, has the resources they need to live with dignity and opportunity.



“Every resident of Massachusetts deserves the basic necessities to not only survive but also thrive. We can and should hold our government accountable to maintaining a strong safety net.”

06

Information & Outreach

MLRI Transforms Legalese into Plain Language with Accessible Legal Resources

One undeniable truth in life is that information is power, and for many low-income individuals, this reality can place them at a significant disadvantage. In Massachusetts, a large number of low-income residents struggle to access legal representation – a crucial lifeline when navigating the complexities of the legal system.

The wealth of knowledge is a core belief at MLRI. The most effective change comes from the exchange of information. That is why we engage in activities to inform policymakers, key stakeholders, and the general public about the issues affecting low-income people and communities.

However, legal aid resources can only be spread so far. Approximately two-thirds of low-income residents are turned away each year due to a lack of civil aid resources. As a result of this justice gap, vulnerable people are left without access to legal advice and, as a result, navigate legal situations without knowing their options or basic rights. To combat this issue, Massachusetts has embraced the goal of providing “100 percent access to justice” through a continuum of meaningful and appropriate services. The use of technology is a critical tool in closing that gap. Since 2005, the Massachusetts Legal Aid Websites Project has been operating through MLRI, funded by the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), in order to provide online legal information and other resources to the general public and to the Massachusetts advocacy community.

The MassLegalHelp.org website, a legal information site targeted to low-income Massachusetts residents and non-lawyer advocates, is a tool developed by the MLRI websites team and funded by MLAC, that aids millions of Massachusetts residents each year. It offers free, practical legal information and resources, in both English and Spanish, to help members of the public learn about their legal rights in Massachusetts and take actionable steps to solve civil legal problems. Designed for individuals not in the legal profession, each article is written in “plain language,” with the purpose of making the information as easy to understand as possible.

After seeing impressive traffic of around one million unique users each year, the site underwent a full refresh in the past year that included a redesign as well as review and update of more than 1,000 pieces of legal information by subject matter experts. The refreshed site, launched in March 2024, features a modern, streamlined look that contains over 800 articles, e-books, and videos, bringing the knowledge and best practices of substantive legal experts to those who couldn’t otherwise access them.



MARLENA IDROBO

2024 American Digital Design Award, GD USA

Following the 2024 redesign, MassLegalHelp.org website was named to the prestigious 2024 GDUSA Digital Design Award list. This recognition highlights the site's exceptional design and user experience, further cementing its role as a key resource for individuals seeking legal help across the Commonwealth.

The success of the Massachusetts Legal Aid Websites Project stands as a shining example of the power of collaboration and a shared commitment to social justice, driven by the indefatigable efforts of MLRI's MassLegalHelp Project Manager, Marlena Idrobo. Organizing attorneys from all corners of legal aid to review and update content, Marlena spearheaded a transformative overhaul of MassLegalHelp.org, ensuring the vital platform is more accessible and user-friendly for residents in need of legal resources.

In her role as Project Manager, Marlena brought a fresh perspective to the project and has worked relentlessly to ensure that the redesign resonates with a diverse array of audiences, particularly those who have historically faced barriers to accessing justice. This award serves as a testament to the hard work of Marlena, and the whole MLRI Websites team in improving access to justice for all. As the site continues to evolve, it remains an essential resource for Massachusetts residents, helping them navigate complex legal issues with ease and confidence.

"People often visit the MassLegalHelp website in moments of crisis. By providing information that folks can trust and presenting it in an understandable format, we hope to help make stressful situations less overwhelming and make the legal system more navigable."

Mass Legal Help
Massachusetts Legal Information





Catalyst for Change

MLRI's annual Catalyst for Change event celebrates exceptional leaders in our community who make a positive impact on people in Massachusetts. In 2024, we presented this award to the Red Sox Foundation, a model for others to follow as one of the most philanthropic team charities in all of professional sports, strategically using their platform to be a leading source of hope and positivity off the field.

MLRI was honored to also present the Gladys Vega Outstanding Community Leader Award to Dr. Geralde Gabeau, the founder and Executive Director of Immigrant Family Services Institute (IFSI). IFSI focuses on the spectrum of immigrant needs from vital essentials to success enhancers using a holistic approach, serving infants to the elderly. A dynamic leader with a deep understanding of immigration issues, Dr. Gabeau delivered a stirring acceptance speech showing why she is regarded as a steadfast proponent for immigrants' rights with an unyielding commitment to social justice.

To all of our generous event sponsors and attendees, we thank you for your support and commitment. We celebrated the amazing work of leaders in our community and raised funds to support our critical work. Thank you for your presence, your time, and your commitment.

If you would like more information about MLRI's annual Catalyst for Change event, please reach out to development@mlri.org.

"Whenever we are facing a huge challenge, a huge issue, we just give MLRI a call, and they are always ready - ready to come and support."

- Dr. Geralde Gabeau

Introducing Legal Aid & Community Education (LACE Project)

COMING IN 2025!

For many years, MLRI had a dedicated internal “training unit” with staff members that developed and coordinated poverty law legal education initiatives for the wider Massachusetts legal aid community. That unit was spun off to a national entity in the mid-2000s because of limited resource issues, creating a significant hole in continuing education of local poverty law practitioners.

At the urging of our legal aid and community partners, MLRI is in the process of reestablishing a training unit that can meet the needs of MA frontline advocates, providers, and community-based partners. This will not only address an identified need but more importantly it will build the knowledge and capacity of our partners in the field to best serve low-income clients.

MLRI’s Legal Aid & Community Education (LACE) Project – formally re-launching in the fall/winter 2025 – will not only focus on poverty law trainings, but also proactively work with community partners to determine what knowledge and technical assistance

is required to inform and empower community members regarding their rights. “Training and professional development are an integral part to civil legal advocacy, as laws, policies, and regulations constantly change,” said Ashley Nyce, Director of Training. “The purpose of this project is to support new and experienced lawyers, advocates, and others working tirelessly on behalf of underserved communities every day.”

This unit will also be responsible for developing legal publications, manuals, and training materials across a host of issue areas (e.g., basic legal skills, appellate practice, racial equity, immigration, housing, public benefits, food insecurity, healthcare, domestic violence & family law, language access, etc.) and will work collaboratively with MLRI’s Massachusetts Legal Aid Websites Project to ensure that educational materials for advocates and for the community are incorporated into our portfolio of online legal resources.

Ashley Nyce joined the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute in 2024, taking on the role of Director of Training. Her journey to MLRI was built on years of experience in legal education and advocacy. Before arriving, Ashley served as a Visiting Professor of Law at Boston College Law School where she founded and led the Child Health and Education Law Clinic. Beyond the clinic, her work extended to teaching in the Civil Litigation Clinic, and guiding faculty through workshops on pedagogy. Prior to Boston College, her passion for mentorship and clinical education shined at Georgetown University Law Center, where she spent several years as a supervising attorney and clinical teaching fellow. There, she played a pivotal role in teaching and supervising both law and medical students in the Health Justice Alliance Law Clinic, blending legal expertise with a deep commitment to social justice.



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“Sandy is a long-time social worker who’s been working in Early Intervention since we moved to Boston 27 years ago, and who has regularly taken advantage of MLRI training sessions. Her ability to aid her clients’ needs has been greatly enhanced by MLRI and that’s why we’re proud to be recurring donors.”

-David and Sandra Lyons

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