



DISABILITY RIGHTS LOUISIANA

Protect. Advocate. Empower.

Disability Rights Louisiana's Financial Access Inclusion & Resources Program

Founded in 1977, Disability Rights Louisiana (DRLA) seeks a new reality for Louisiana residents with disabilities, by protecting them from abuse and neglect, and advocating for equitable access to opportunities and resources that empower them to thrive and live independently in the community.

Over one-third of Louisiana residents have disabilities—a rate that is 70% higher than the national average. Our community persistently faces abuse and neglect by individuals, institutional and systemic discrimination, lack of public investment in vital resources, and inaccessible spaces, programs, and opportunities. As a result, when compared to non-disabled individuals, people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be arrested, unemployed, unhoused, living in poverty, and without a high school diploma.

Through direct legal representation, individual advocacy, impact litigation, monitoring of institutions, and policy change, DRLA helps Louisiana's disability community achieve access to community-based healthcare, affordable and accessible housing, quality education, meaningful jobs, unencumbered voting access, and safety from abuse and neglect.

The Intersection of Incarceration & Disability

A United States resident with a disability is four times more likely to be in a jail or prison than to live in the community. While incarcerated, people with disabilities are frequently deprived of necessary medical care, supports, services, and accommodations. After incarceration, people with disabilities are often unable to participate in vocational, educational, release, and reentry programs that are meant to curb recidivism, due to lack of accommodations or connections to disability-related services.

Research suggests that economic disparities and limited employment opportunities are both causes and effects of incarceration and recidivism. People with disabilities, regardless of criminal records, are twice as likely to live in poverty, and are almost three times as likely to be unemployed as people without disabilities. Meanwhile, formerly incarcerated people, regardless of disability, are five times as likely to be denied a job. Such factors leave formerly incarcerated people with disabilities at a disproportionate risk for unemployment, financial instability, and recidivism.

Last year, DRLA worked against the mass-incarceration of people with disabilities by helping: 361 people with disabilities remove employment barriers, 142 access a quality education, and 113 access healthcare. In 2022, we won a class action lawsuit against the Louisiana Department of Corrections (DOC) with a federal judge finding a local prison's treatment of individuals with mental illness to be unconstitutional. Our policy team is working with statewide partners to end the use of solitary confinement on people with mental illness.

Financial Access Inclusion & Resources Program Need

In 2019, DRLA launched the country's first and Louisiana's only program targeting the reentry and financial coaching needs of people with disabilities, Financial Access Inclusion & Resources (FAIR). FAIR's methods and outcomes have been evaluated and considered a success by researchers at Rutgers University and University of New Orleans, as **program participants experience higher employment rates and lower recidivism rates than the general disability population**. FAIR is DRLA's only program that is strictly supported by private grant funds. **DRLA is currently seeking new sources of funding to continue this groundbreaking and vital work beyond Summer 2024.**

FAIR Program Strategy

FAIR provides financial coaching and case management services to formerly incarcerated people with disabilities, to assist them in accessing the information, resources, and support they need to achieve the employment and financial security necessary to remain in the community post-incarceration. FAIR provides limited legal services when clients' rights as people with disabilities are violated, or when they face court-related fines and fees (in partnership with the Justice and Accountability Center of Louisiana). FAIR empowers clients to set the goals of their services, and they collaborate with FAIR financial coaches and case managers to find and execute solutions to their reentry barriers.

FAIR staff are trained in financial coaching, disability benefits applications, benefits counseling, local healthcare and disability-related services, reasonable accommodations, disability rights, and local reentry services. Furthermore, the majority of our FAIR staff have been impacted by the incarceration of a family member and use that lived experience to inform their approach.

FAIR's holistic approach is informed by research demonstrating that: (1) successful reentry services for people with disabilities require awareness of complex treatment strategies, access to accommodations and income supports, and an intertwined system of services considering justice, health, clinical, and welfare service needs; (2) debts pose barriers to reentry; and (3) employment programs implementing benefits counseling and financial coaching strategies experience more and longer lasting job placements.

FAIR Client Profile

Between June 2019 and June 2023, FAIR provided financial coaching and case management services to 177 formerly incarcerated people with disabilities who live in the Greater New Orleans area. Of these clients:

- 100% reported having mental illnesses, intellectual, and/or physical disabilities;
- 81% identified as male;
- 76% identified as Black or African American;
- 63% had been incarcerated for over two years;
- 73% contacted the program within their first year of release from incarceration; and
- 48% had less than a GED or high school diploma.

FAIR Client Activities:

- 65% received help with applying and preparing for jobs;
- 56% received help with applying for income supports;
- 52% received help with budgeting and benefits planning;
- 45% received help with improving access to safe, reliable and affordable housing
- 44% received help with improving access to healthcare;
- 44% were connected to legal assistance;
- 14% received help with accessing transportation;
- 14% received help with banking, asset-building, and credit-building; and
- 10% filed their taxes.

FAIR Program Success

Fifty-one percent of all FAIR clients who have actively engaged in the program secured jobs. This is significant because, in 2022, only 21% of people with disabilities, regardless of criminal records, were employed; and people with criminal records, regardless of disabilities, are 50% less likely to receive a job offer. FAIR has captured a cumulative total monthly income increase of \$103,062 per month among 55% of its active clients. Furthermore, FAIR documented a cumulative total of \$124,074 in reduced debt among 32% of active clients.

Only 4% of FAIR clients served over the last 4 years have reported being re-incarcerated. By contrast, Louisiana DOC reports that 27% of individuals return to incarceration within two years of their release.