

# Annual Report 2024

Text only version

Disability Rights Louisiana  
2024 Annual Impact Report

Learn more about our work by visiting our website:

[DisabilityRightsLA.org](https://DisabilityRightsLA.org)

Call us:

1-800-960-7705

From our leadership

Dear Friends,

As I reflect on my first year as Executive Director, I'm filled with gratitude & excitement. I am blessed to be given the opportunity to steward our mission & grateful to work alongside a team of fearless, passionate, and dedicated staff across this state. Every day, this team shows up ready to champion the rights of the most vulnerable members of our community. I couldn't be more proud to be a part of this work.

This past year has been a year of listening, learning, and building—laying the groundwork for a stronger foundation, a deeper connection to our community, and a more resilient future. We've made significant strides in improving our financial stability, ensuring we can continue to deliver on our mission with confidence and care. We've streamlined internal communications to allow our team to operate with greater clarity and efficiency. We've also deepened our engagement with the community—listening more closely and showing up more intentionally. Our collaborations with external partners and increased connection to our national network have opened new doors for shared learning, innovation, and broader impact.

Our 2024 Annual Report showcases our unwavering commitment to our mission to protect & advocate for the rights of the 1.2 million people with disabilities in Louisiana.

The report also demonstrates responsible stewardship and showcases the impact of your generosity on helping us transform lives across the state. These achievements are the result of collective effort, and I'm inspired every day by the passion and resilience of our team and the people we serve. While there is always more work ahead, I'm confident that we are on the right path—guided by our

values, united by our mission, and driven by the belief that change is possible.

Thank you for being part of this journey.

In solidarity and with gratitude,  
Ranie T. Thompson  
Executive Director

## Table of Contents

Who we Are  
Our Impact  
Client Impact Stories  
Community Advocacy  
Legal Advocacy  
Monitoring and Investigations  
Policy Advocacy  
Outreach & Training  
Financials  
Supporters  
Board & Advisors

## Who We Are

Founded in 1977, Disability Rights Louisiana (DRLA) is driven by a mission to protect and advocate for the human and legal rights of people with disabilities of all ages across our state. We work to empower the disability community to live an integrated life, free from abuse, neglect and exploitation.

We are a part of the Protection & Advocacy System for people with disabilities, a national network of nonprofits that are federally mandated to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities in their respective states.

Our team of 52 staff includes attorneys, advocates, and policy specialists who work together to protect and empower people with disabilities. We focus our efforts around the following key issues:

Access to critical services, places, and opportunities;  
Autonomy;  
Education;  
Employment;  
Healthcare; and  
Safety from abuse and neglect.

## The Need for Our Services

Over one-third of Louisiana residents have disabilities, including mental health, intellectual, and physical disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

Our disability community faces discrimination and a lack of public investment in the services that would enable all members to be integrated in the community.

As a result, when compared with their non-disabled peers, people with disabilities are over twice as likely to be unemployed<sup>1</sup> and live in poverty<sup>2</sup>. They are also far more likely to leave high-school without graduating<sup>3</sup>, and to experience abuse<sup>4</sup>. DRLA works to change this.

## Our Impact

### Individual Impact

DRLA seeks to eradicate the abuse and neglect of adults and children with disabilities, and create conditions that empower people with disabilities to achieve well-being and independence.

In 2024, we got closer to this vision, by addressing barriers for individuals in the following ways.

DRLA provided individual legal and non-legal advocacy to people with disabilities in approximately 2,300 cases in Fiscal Year 2024.

Through these cases, we:

Empowered individuals to access critical services, facilities, housing and other spaces in their communities.

Empowered individuals to maintain or expand their ability to exercise autonomy and make decisions about their own lives.

Protected individuals' rights to remain in school with access to the services they need to succeed in school and graduate.

Protected individuals from discrimination, and empowered individuals to access resources and training so that they could secure competitive jobs.

Empowered individuals to access healthcare services so that they could thrive in the community or receive the care they need in institutions.

Protected the rights of individuals, to keep them safe from abuse and neglect, in both institutional and community-based settings.

2,300

Individual Legal & Non-Legal Advocacy Cases

1,200

Individuals provided with information & referrals

DRLA provided information and referral services to approximately 1,200 people with disabilities, to empower them to address the issues they are facing independently, or to connect them to the community partners that could best support them.

## Systemic Impact

DRLA uses impact litigation, investigations, monitoring, policy advocacy, and community training to address systemic issues that harm large numbers of people with disabilities, and to further the independence of the disability community. In Fiscal Year 2024, we made progress toward this goal:

DRLA worked to improve healthcare access, stop abuse and neglect, and remove voting barriers for people with disabilities through 8 systemic litigation cases. Approximately 29,600 people are directly impacted by these cases today. Thousands more will benefit from these systemic changes in the future.

DRLA conducted monitoring and investigations of over 500 institutions and agencies to prevent the abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation of approximately 10,000 people with disabilities.

Through state government policy advocacy, DRLA helped secure an additional \$42 million in state funding for home and community-based healthcare services that will empower hundreds of adults to remain in their communities instead of being institutionalized.

DRLA provided outreach & training to approximately 2,100 people with disabilities, their families, and the professionals who serve them. With this knowledge, they are better positioned to advocate for their rights and to access the resources and services they need to live independently.

## Client Impact Stories

### Tony's Story

Tony's mom Carol says he has a knack for reading people's hearts. She explains, "He'll see someone, get a good sense about them, and just start singing the Spanish songs his grandma sang when he was little. He doesn't speak a lot, but those songs just come out."

Today, Tony bikes 5 miles a day, goes to horse therapy, and sees his family all the time. It's a stark difference from when Carol first contacted DRLA.

At that time, Tony was living in a group home. He had a poor diet, he wasn't getting exercise, he was allowed to play video games all night long, and he was taking a medication that negatively impacted his mood and behavior. The group home kicked him out one day, after he had a major outburst of frustration. "They didn't go through any protocol or try to help him figure out where he would go—they just sent the discharge paperwork and said he has to go," Carol describes. When she picked him up, Tony was overweight, having multiple seizures weekly, and was clearly traumatized.

DRLA intervened to hold Tony's bed at the group home for 6 months. DRLA helped Carol understand Tony's rights, explore his options, and advocate for his interests with the Human Services District. Tony's parents feared the worst if he stayed in such a restrictive environment at the group home. They decided to apply for the New Opportunities Waiver, to create the best future for Tony. Tony stayed with his parents until he was approved for waiver services.

Tony's waiver services have empowered him to live in his own apartment, close to his parents. His mom coordinates his team of care attendants who support him 24-hours per day and, "love Tony. One came with him from the group home. Another says that being with Tony helps his depression," explains Carol. Tony is the healthiest he's been in 20 years, he's seizure-free, and now he's playing Miracle League Baseball.

## Client Impact Stories

### Shane's Story

Shane's grandmother, Victoria, describes him as, "a big boy with the biggest heart. He loves to give you a bear hug." Shane loves animals, swimming, and exploring Google Maps. He was born with a disability that affects how he communicates and walks.

"When he was little, he made so much progress with ABA therapy—he was learning how to speak and express his emotions," Victoria recalls. "But once he started elementary school, everything changed. He was mistreated by the school, to the point where his speech regressed. He came home with bruises. It just broke my heart."

Victoria initially tried to address these issues on her own. However, when faced with a room of about 10 individuals representing the school's interests, she quickly realized she needed DRLA's help to fight for Shane's interests.

Over the years, DRLA partnered with Victoria to advocate for Shane in crucial areas: We ensured that the school reinstated his ABA therapy. After learning that Shane was going for weeks without instruction from a teacher, we ensured that he was provided with appropriate educational services by teachers and paraprofessionals who were trained to support him. We got the school to install cameras in a classroom so that they could identify and prevent the abuse he was regularly experiencing at the hands of his classmates, when he was left unattended. When he developed an injury, we ensured the school installed a ramp so he could access his classroom and sent an accessible school bus to help Shane get to and from school.

Nobody should have to fight these battles, and they definitely should not have to do it alone. "DRLA has been our saving grace," Victoria says. "Every time an attorney showed up for us, it was a weight off my chest. I knew Shane would be okay."

### Community Advocacy programs

DRLA's Community Advocacy programs use non-attorney advocates to prevent abuse, neglect, and other rights violations against people with disabilities, and to

promote their independence and financial security.

Empowering people disabilities to achieve financial security through employment

The Client Assistance Program empowered 50 job seekers with disabilities to access job training, assistive technology, continuing education, and funding through Louisiana Rehabilitation Services. As a result, these individuals were positioned to secure and maintain competitive employment.

50 people accessed job readiness services

The Financial Access Inclusion and Resources Program empowered 48 formerly incarcerated people with disabilities to remain in the community long-term. Staff provided these individuals with financial coaching and connected them with housing, healthcare, education, financial assistance, job training, banking and other resources. As a result, approximately two-thirds of these clients obtained or maintained employment and several improved their financial security through debt reduction.

48 people supported on a path to reentry and financial security

The Work Incentives Planning & Assistance Program empowered 441 beneficiaries of Social Security disability benefits to become more financially secure by helping them understand how earnings from work will affect their disability checks, Medicaid, Medicare, and other benefits. As a result, most of these individuals pursued job opportunities.

441 people prepared for employment with benefits counseling

Community Advocacy programs

Promoting the autonomy and safety of people with disabilities

The Community Living Ombudsman Program protected the rights of 4,306 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who live in Intermediate Care Facilities across Louisiana. Staff identified and addressed 1,495 issues related to abuse, neglect, and autonomy of the residents. As a result, facilities corrected staffing shortages, improved protocols for resident safety and personal care, improved medical care, and terminated abusive staff. Additionally, residents were empowered to pursue social activities and other opportunities to live more

independently.

1,495 issues related to abuse, neglect and autonomy in group homes were addressed

The Supported Independent Living Advocacy Program advocated for 53 people with developmental disabilities who receive home and community-based Medicaid waiver services. Staff helped these individuals adjust their home-health services to better meet their needs, improve their housing conditions, access employment services, improve communication with their care teams , and strengthen their decision-making power.

53 people received improved home and community based waiver services

To learn more about our Community Advocacy programs, scan the QR code at left to visit our web page.

<https://disabilityrightsla.org/how-we-can-help/our-programs/>

## Legal Advocacy

### Individual Cases

Our legal team, staffed by 6 attorneys, provides legal representation and technical assistance to people with disabilities when their civil and human rights are violated. In Fiscal Year 2024, DRLA provided individual legal advocacy in 218 cases.

In 32 cases, we helped individuals access critical services, facilities, housing and other spaces in their communities.

In 15 cases, we empowered adults to maintain or expand their ability to make decisions about their own lives.

In 79 cases, we helped children remain in school, with access to the services and supports they need to succeed in school and graduate.

In 24 cases, we helped adults fight employment barriers like discrimination.

In 45 cases, we helped individuals access healthcare services so that they could thrive in the community or receive the care they need in institutions.

In 23 cases, we protected individuals from abuse and neglect.

## Legal Advocacy



## Systemic Litigation

When DRLA observes issues that harm large numbers of people with disabilities, we use impact litigation to protect and empower the disability community at large. In Fiscal Year 2024, DRLA worked on 8 systemic litigation cases that are impacting over 29,000 people with disabilities. These cases have the potential to protect and further the rights of thousands more in the future. Examples of these cases include:

### Demanding Healthcare Access for Children with Disabilities

*AJ v. Greenstein* is a class action suit alleging that the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) failed to arrange for approved in-home skilled nursing services for children under 21 years old who receive services under Medicaid developmental disability waivers. DRLA and partner organizations have been working with LDH toward implementation of a settlement agreement to ensure that children on Medicaid waivers can receive life-saving nursing services in their homes. The parties recently agreed to an extension of the settlement agreement for an additional year.

*Chisholm v. Greenstein* is a class action suit filed on behalf of children with developmental disabilities, between the ages of 3 and 21, who are eligible for Medicaid. LDH was leaving children waiting for years to receive services that they are eligible for and that are vital to their development, such as Medicaid waiver services and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) Therapy. To enforce the settlement in this case, DRLA is working closely with LDH to ensure that all eligible children receive the care that they need.

If you think your child may be impacted by either of these cases, please contact us at 1-800-960-7705 and explain that you are calling regarding the *AJ* or *Chisholm* settlements.

For more information about our litigation cases, scan the QR code to visit our website:

<https://disabilityrightsla.org/litigation-tracker/>

### Protecting the rights of institutionalized people with disabilities

*Charles v. LeBlanc* is a class action lawsuit that DRLA filed on behalf of hundreds of men with mental illness, who were facing abuse and neglect in solitary confinement at a state prison in North Louisiana called David Wade Correctional

Center. After two trials, the court found that the prison had failed to provide these men with mental healthcare, was causing their mental health conditions to worsen, and was inflicting other cruel and unusual punishments. These actions violate the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The court ordered the appointment of three experts to evaluate the prison's current conditions and develop a plan for the prison and the State to remedy the violations.

Cooper v. Greenstein is a suit that DRLA filed on behalf of individuals with mental illness who are found not guilty by reason of insanity or incompetent to stand trial. The courts have ordered these individuals to receive care and treatment in psychiatric facilities. Instead, they have faced prolonged and unconstitutional confinement in parish jails, due to lack of bed-space at appropriate facilities. DRLA and partner organizations continue to enforce a settlement agreement with LDH, in order to reduce these wait times. As a part of the settlement, LDH is in the process of opening 4 facilities to provide in-patient psychiatric care to some of these individuals.

## Monitoring and Investigations

DRLA has federally mandated authority to access and protect vulnerable people with disabilities in institutions, in ways that no other nonprofits in the state can. With this authority, DRLA conducted monitoring and investigations of over 500 institutions to prevent the abuse and neglect of approximately 10,000 people.

Thanks to funding from Tulane Law School's Lutz Fellowship and DRLA's donors, we have taken critical steps to expand our efforts to protect institutionalized children with disabilities through our Justice Behind Walls Project.

In August, DRLA's new legal fellow, Kellie Jackson, began traveling across Louisiana to monitor the Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities, Therapeutic Group Homes, and detention centers that primarily house children with disabilities. She is meeting with these children, listening to their stories, and uncovering abuse, neglect, and rights violations that our legal and policy teams aim to address on a systemic level.

## Policy Advocacy

### Empowering Adults with Disabilities to Remain in the Community

In 2024, DRLA worked with the Live at Home LA coalition and the Office of Aging

and Adult Services to convince the legislature to create 750 more waiver slots, prioritized for individuals who live in institutional facilities. This will enable 750 people to remain in or return to their homes and communities with the appropriate in-home care.

Additionally, we worked with our partners to successfully advocate for legislation that created a new fund, the Community Options Waiver Fund. This fund supports home and community-based services for seniors and individuals with adult-onset disabilities in Louisiana. The first allocation of funds was made in 2024, in the amount of \$42 million. This will help hundreds of people leave institutions in favor of receiving care in their homes and communities, while a number of others will be able to avoid institutionalization altogether.

These changes will improve health and independence outcomes for people with disabilities, and they can save the state money. For example, Medicaid spends an average of approximately \$40,000 per year to provide home and community based waiver services to a person--less than half the cost to care for a nursing home resident.<sup>6</sup>

DRLA improved voting access for people with disabilities across the state

In October 2024, we launched a statewide voter education campaign in advance of the the November 5th presidential election. This involved billboards, radio, and TV ads that reached over 700,000 individuals across the state. These ads informed audiences of adults with disabilities' rights to vote, and directed voters with disabilities to DRLA if they were facing voting barriers.

You can view the TV and streaming ads on our Youtube Channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwm6cNQ6N5BsApeykPI-zMg>

Materials for our online and billboard campaigns can be found on our website:

<https://disabilityrightsla.org/your-vote-your-right-drla-offers-helpful-info-and-election-day-hotline-for-voters-with-disabilities/>

On election day, we worked with the Power Coalition for Equity and Justice and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to inspect polling places to identify access issues. We hosted a Voter Hotline to provide guidance to over 100 callers with disabilities who had questions about their voting rights or needed help navigating barriers they were facing at the polls.

We are working to ensure that the Secretary of State's new ADA Compliance Officer is working to make voting in Louisiana more accessible, and that the

State's Voting Accessibility Advisory Group consists of individuals from the disability advocacy community, who understand the concerns of individuals with disabilities.

## Outreach & Training

In fiscal year 2024, DRLA staff participated in 24 events across the state, providing training and information to over 2,100 people with disabilities and those who know them. Our work was featured in 38 news articles, and 8 TV or radio appearances.

## DRLA Featured in Louisiana Bar Journal

In 2024, the Louisiana Bar Journal, featured several articles by DRLA attorneys. Their October/November edition, "Focus on Accessibility and the Law...seeks to highlight the ongoing work of the Louisiana State Bar Association's (LSBA) Legal Services for Persons with Disabilities Committee and the Louisiana Access to Justice Commission's Accessibility Committee in ensuring that individuals who face those barriers are able to fully participate in and seek redress through the legal system."

The work and expertise of DRLA's Director of Legal Programs and Advocacy Melanie Bray and former staff attorney Sarah Bacot were featured in three articles, addressing how the legal community can support the autonomy of individuals with disabilities, improve community accessibility for people with disabilities & improve disaster response for people with disabilities.

## Preserving Autonomy by Educating Judges and Lawyers

DRLA worked with the LSBA and other community partners to develop a reference card to educate judges and attorneys on the interdiction process and less restrictive alternatives, such as Supported Decision Making. It was published in September 2024. An electronic version of the Reference Card can be accessed through the QR Code. Physical copies can be obtained at the Bar Center.

## Financials

In Fiscal Year 2024, we spent \$4,499,801 to protect, empower, and advocate for

the 1.2 million people with disabilities who live in Louisiana.

80% of our expenditures supported the services that directly impact our clients, and 20% of our expenditures were administrative costs that enable us to support and manage our 52 staff, state-wide operations, and funding.

Our work was supported by a variety of funding sources:

54% of expenses were supported by federal grants  
24% of expenses were supported by state funds; and  
22% of expenses were supported by other funds from individual donors, foundations, other private organizations, and city governments.

## Supporters

Below are some of our supporter and partners who were vital part of our work to protect and empower the disability community in 2024.

While DRLA's work is primarily supported by federal and state grants, the contributions of our partners, donors, and private funders have empowered us to innovate, expand our reach, and strengthen our impact in ways that we could not have done otherwise.

Logos from:

## Citations

1. Andara, K., & Khattar, R. (2024, February 20). Disabled workers saw record employment gains in 2023, but gaps remain. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/disabled-workers-saw-record-employment-gains-in-2023-but-gaps-remain>

2. Goodman, N., Morris, M., & Boston, K. (2019, February 8). Financial inequality: Disability, race and poverty in America. National Disability Institute. <https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/disability-race-poverty-in-america.pdf>

3. Diament, M. (2017, May 3). Nearly 40 percent of students with disabilities don't graduate. Disability Scoop. <https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2015/05/12/nearly-40-dont-graduate/20292/>

4. U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime (2018). National Crime Victims' Rights Week Resource Guide: Crime and Victimization Fact Sheets. [https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/ncvrw2018/info\\_flyers/fact\\_sheets/2018NCVRW\\_VictimsWithDisabilities\\_508\\_QC.pdf](https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/ncvrw2018/info_flyers/fact_sheets/2018NCVRW_VictimsWithDisabilities_508_QC.pdf)

5. Disability and Health Data System, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, December 18). Disability Impacts, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Data – BRFSS, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/dhds/impacts/index.html>

6. Louisiana Department of Health, Office of Aging and Adult Services. Community Choices Waiver Fact Sheet (2025, February 20). <https://ldh.la.gov/assets/docs/oaas/publications/factsheets/ccw-fact-sheet.pdf>  
DRLA's work in 2024 was supported at taxpayer expense by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, The Administration for Community Living; Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration; U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration; and the Social Security Administration.

This report was published at U.S. taxpayer expense, through the administrations listed above. This publication does not constitute an official communication, or represent the views, positions or policies of, or the endorsements by any of these federal agencies.

Print versions of this report can be made available in alternative formats upon request.

## Board members

Disability Rights Louisiana (DRLA) is governed by a voluntary Board of Directors that consist of a diverse group of individuals who reside throughout the State of Louisiana, and who are largely personally impacted by disability. The individuals that serve on the DRLA Board have a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences and expertise that allow them to contribute in a number of ways and to provide responsible oversight of the organization.

Patsy White, Board Chair, Congressional District 1  
Monica Stampley, Vice Chair, District 4  
Tamara Cannon, Treasurer, District 1  
Kathryn Fernandez Lafrentz, Secretary, District 2

Adrienne D. S. Thomas, District 6  
Barksdale Hortenstine, Jr., District 2  
Giselle Celestine, District 3  
Tamar Baskind, District 2  
Lillian Dejean, District 3

## PAIMI COUNCIL

The Protection & Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI) Advisory Council supports Disability Rights Louisiana by working with its staff and Board of Directors to develop priorities for the agency's PAIMI program. Advisory members oversee the general effectiveness of the program and work with staff to bring about any needed changes.

Barksdale Hortenstine, Jr.  
Clarice Gallegos  
Luliana "Lana" Charles  
Sherrard Crespo  
Hanna Hilgeman  
Matt Bailey  
Byrne Sherwood  
Eddie Jenkins

## Office locations

8325 Oak St.  
New Orleans, LA, 70118

201 Rue Iberville # 100  
Lafayette, LA 70508

For more information or assistance, please contact us.  
1-800-960-7705

Visit our website:  
[DisabilityRightsLA.org](http://DisabilityRightsLA.org)

Follow us on social media:  
Facebook  
Twitter  
Instagram

LinkedIn  
Youtube