

DRLA 2025 Annual Report - Text only version

Disability Rights Louisiana

Annual 2025 Report
800-960-7705

DisabilityRightsLA.org

A message from our director

We are proud to reflect on our work in 2025—a year defined by resilience and undeterred advocacy. This report demonstrates how we responded to our community's needs with the same determination that has guided our work for nearly five decades: protecting individual rights while fighting for systemic change for the 1.2 million people with disabilities across Louisiana.

In 2025, our work became more critical than ever. Our intake team fielded over 20% more calls than the previous year, reflecting a rapidly increasing demand for services amidst increased challenges to healthcare access, economic supports, education services, and community living. At the same time, threats to federal funding and delays in award allocations tested our capacity and resolve.

This year demanded more of us—and our team rose with resilience, creativity, and an unwavering commitment to those we serve. Laser focused, we pursued our mission with the understanding that we are made for this moment and our mission is not only enduring, but essential.

Every day, our clients and community partners remind us that access, fairness, and self-determination are not privileges—they are fundamental rights. Through strategic litigation, policy advocacy, community education, outreach, and cross-sector collaboration, we dismantled barriers that limit independence, opportunity, and dignity for people with disabilities. We expanded outreach to underserved communities and amplified community voices. We deepened our on-the-ground impact through investigative and monitoring work in facilities where people with disabilities reside—ensuring accountability and driving systemic change beyond the courtroom.

We are deeply grateful to the funders, donors, staff, self-advocates, volunteers, and community partners who made our impact in 2025 possible. As we look ahead, we do so with clarity and purpose—committed to strengthening our

advocacy, expanding our reach, and continuing the pursuit of a future where people with disabilities can fully exercise their rights and live with dignity.

Who we are

Disability Rights Louisiana (DRLA) is a nonprofit organization that protects and advocates 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.

In the 1970s, people with disabilities had no guaranteed rights to work, attend school, or receive healthcare in their communities. Many lived in institutions where abuse was rampant. Congress mandated that each state establish an independent organization to safeguard the civil and human rights of people with disabilities. DRLA was born out of that mandate in 1977.

Our work is critical today. When compared with their non-disabled peers, people with disabilities are over twice as likely to be unemployed¹ and live in poverty.² They are also far more likely to leave high school without graduating,³ and to experience abuse.⁴ DRLA works to change this.

1/3 of Louisiana residents have disabilities, including mental health, intellectual, and physical disabilities.⁵

Many of our attorneys, advocates, and policy specialists are part of the disability community we serve, and many have done this work for well-over a decade.

We change individual lives through direct legal representation and non-legal advocacy. We hold systems accountable through litigation, institutional monitoring, policy advocacy, and community training.

Our work is focused around improving outcomes for the disability community in these key areas:

- Education
- Institutions
- Healthcare
- Employment
- Accessibility
- Autonomy

drla's 2025 impact by the numbers

1,736 people:

We empowered approximately 1,736 people with information and referrals, connecting callers with resources to address issues independently or with community partners.

488 people:

We empowered approximately 488 people through direct non-legal advocacy, removing barriers to employment, healthcare, and independent living, helping avoid the need for legal intervention.

513 facilities:

We monitored 513 facilities, creating ripple effects that can protect, empower, and improve conditions for the 5,277 residents in these facilities.

283 people + thousands more:

We protected 283 people through direct legal representation or guidance, stepping in when civil rights, safety, and independence were threatened. We have the potential to impact thousands more through class action litigation that aims to expand healthcare access and improve institutional conditions, and through an investigation aimed at examining involuntary commitment practices.

\$27 million saved:

We empowered 750 individuals to avoid or leave institutional care through policy advocacy, securing home and community-based Medicaid waiver slots—resulting in an estimated \$27 million in savings for the state. We have the potential to impact thousands of students through policy advocacy aimed at improving school safety for children with disabilities.

36 outreach & trainings:

We empowered thousands through outreach and training via 21 events, 11 news articles, and 4 media appearances.

DRLA's 2025 Impact by The Issues

Education

We worked to keep 110 children in school, with the supports that help them thrive and learn. We championed legislation that will bolster restraint and seclusion protections for thousands of students statewide.

Institutions

We monitored 513 facilities to protect the rights of 5,277 adults and children with disabilities who live in them. We handled systemic litigation with the potential to improve conditions and treatment for thousands across the state.

Healthcare

We helped secure 750 new Medicaid waiver slots for home healthcare, empowering hundreds to live in the community and saving the state millions in institutional care. We helped 60 individuals address barriers to the healthcare they need. Our class action litigation has the potential to expand access to life-saving Medicaid services for thousands of children.

Employment

We helped 504 individuals address barriers to competitive jobs and financial security, returning over \$400,000 to the local economy through the earnings of just 30 clients.

Accessibility

We supported systemic efforts with the potential to remove accessibility barriers for thousands of people with disabilities when they vote, use public transit, and access courts. We worked to help 45 individuals access housing, transit, and community spaces and services.

Autonomy

We helped 301 people address issues related to autonomy and rights violations in institutional settings and in the community. We conducted a systemic investigation to examine Louisiana's involuntary commitment system.

Client Impact Stories

Brennen is on the autism spectrum. After pre-k, elementary school became a cycle of school transfers, exclusion, and mistreatment. His mom, Bethani, fought for him for years, knowing her son was not the problem; the environment was.

Brennen was typically put in classrooms exclusively for students with disabilities. He was physically restrained, despite Bethani's repeated pleas and warnings that this would only escalate his behavior, as well as being isolated in classrooms and conference rooms while being monitored. He was regularly sent home from school and spent nearly two years on a shortened school day schedule or "homebound," receiving only minimal instruction at home on a laptop instead of in the classroom.

"I was being strong-armed by the school," Bethani recalls. "I felt defeated. I attended IEP meetings every month. I got so much pushback when I was explaining that my son wasn't getting the socialization he needed and was falling behind."

After a parent advocate encouraged her to request a state-facilitated Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting, Bethani asked for DRLA's help. Bethani gave DRLA Attorney Shay a five-inch binder of supplemental and revised IEP reports, Behavioral Plans, and Evaluations which took place over a two-year span. Shay immediately recognized numerous ways in which the school district violated Brennen's right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education. Together, they created a list of objectives to pursue at the next IEP meeting.

"The school board wasn't expecting me to come with an attorney," she says. "Once they realized Shay wasn't going to let them keep pushing me and Brennen around, things were different."

Brennen was transferred to his zoned school and placed in a regular classroom with his non-disabled peers—with the supports he needs to succeed. Today, Brennen is thriving in school, earning A's in conduct and passing his classes. His

aide understands how to help him, and there are no more explosive episodes or urgent calls home. "He felt like everyone was out to get him and that he'd been labeled, but he doesn't feel like that anymore. Now he has adults he can trust at school, and I feel comfortable going to work without the fear of him being sent home or urgent calls advising that I pick him up from school immediately."

Empowered by her experience, Bethani later testified before the state senate about restraint and seclusion in schools, helping secure legislation requiring cameras in special education classrooms.

"Parents feel they are pushed against a wall and like their kids will get the backlash if they don't go with what the school says. For once, I felt like I was being heard when voicing my concerns instead of an overly emotional parent and being dismissed. What y'all do is excellent work. I am forever grateful and I know without a doubt, had it not been for Shay, Brennen would still be on a homebound setting and struggling with his academics."

Client Impact Stories

Wanda is the guardian for her beloved cousin, Sharon, who was born in the 1950s with a developmental disability and brain injury. Wanda describes her as "having a memory like an elephant." When Sharon's mom died, she gave Wanda a note: "mom asked me to give this to you once she's gone." That's when Wanda learned she would become Sharon's guardian.

Wanda was caring for her own mother and husband--both in poor health. She couldn't provide the housing and daily care Sharon needed. Sharon moved into a group home and Wanda visited regularly, took her on outings, and advocated fiercely for her.

One night, Wanda received a call from Shirley Brown, a Disability Rights Louisiana ombudsman, telling her Sharon was in the hospital on a ventilator with COVID. The group home never called. Sharon recovered, and Shirley helped Wanda ensure Sharon received proper follow-up care. Wanda learned that Shirley visits group homes regularly to check on residents and advocate when they're not getting the care they need.

When Wanda asked Sharon why she never mentioned Shirley, Sharon replied that the group home told residents, "not to tell our families about Shirley Brown." Since then, Wanda has watched Shirley interact with Sharon and other residents. "Their eyes light up when she talks to them--they know she's there for them and that she'd fight to the bitter end for them."

Over the years, Shirley helped Wanda and Sharon navigate financial abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. One staff member cashed Sharon's stimulus check and opened a bank card in her name, making withdrawals while Sharon was in the ICU. With Shirley's help, Wanda went to the Medicaid Fraud Unit and recovered the funds charged on the bank card. Wanda transferred Sharon to a new group home. "If Shirley hadn't helped me, I couldn't have ever maneuvered through all the red tape to get anything done," Wanda explained.

At the next home, things started well, until red flags appeared. When Shirley learned Sharon had become incontinent, she pushed for a doctor's appointment that revealed a severe bladder infection. Suddenly, staff described Sharon as problematic. She had bruises, a broken pelvis, and a fractured tailbone. Once in a wheelchair, she couldn't bathe in the inaccessible bathroom and received only sponge baths. Shirley helped Wanda report abuse concerns to the Attorney General and pushed the group home to make the bathroom accessible. The AG made unannounced visits and cited multiple infractions. While they couldn't prove abuse, Wanda believes the increased oversight and upgraded bathroom made a difference for all residents.

Sharon now lives in a nursing home where she receives the high-level healthcare and support she needs. "I can't count how many times I've called Shirley. I called each time I had to make a decision about Sharon's care, and I don't know what I would've done without her." Wanda describes DRLA's critical role: "If your team wasn't working, people would have a free hand to mistreat and abuse the residents in these group homes. Ya'll are what keeps them in the middle because they know they can't go too far or they'll get caught."

education

We're helping children get the support they need to stay and thrive in school.

Students with disabilities are 2x as likely to be suspended or disciplined. 6

DRLA provided 110 children with legal representation and guidance to address issues they were facing in school. We helped these children by getting schools to: reverse suspensions, expulsions, or alternative school referrals; update IEPs or 504 Plans with necessary services, accommodations, or behavioral supports; provide timely evaluations and related services; replace harsh discipline with supportive interventions; create transition plans for successful graduation.

Children with disabilities are disproportionately subjected to seclusion, restraint,

and harsh discipline in school—practices proven to worsen anxiety, depression, and academic disengagement. After the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and Louisiana's Legislative Auditor raised red flags about our state's misuse and lack of oversight of these practices, we worked with the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council, the Arc of Louisiana, and the Louisiana Department of Education to draft and pass legislation improving training and reporting around restraint and seclusion in schools.

We directly impacted 110 children facing barriers in school. Our policy advocacy has the potential to impact thousands more children with disabilities in Louisiana schools.

Our individual cases reveal which school districts most frequently violate students' rights. We are working to address these systemic problems through staff training, policy advocacy, and litigation—keeping more children with disabilities in school and learning.

Rights protection in Institutions

We're improving conditions in institutions.

People with disabilities are at least 4 times more likely to experience abuse and neglect. 7

DRLA has federally mandated authority to access and protect people with disabilities in institutions, where they are most vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

In FY25, our ombudsmen made multiple visits to 481 Intermediate Care Facilities for individuals with Developmental Disabilities (ICF-DD) across Louisiana. Staff identified and addressed 1,441 issues related to abuse, neglect, and autonomy of residents. 96% of these issues were resolved successfully, with facilities: correcting staffing shortages; improving protocols for resident safety, personal care, and medical care; and terminating abusive staff.

Additionally, our legal team monitored conditions in 32 institutions across the state, including psychiatric residential treatment facilities, juvenile detention centers, therapeutic group homes, jails, prisons, nursing homes, hospital mental health units, and state-run mental health hospitals. We surveyed conditions, spoke with residents and staff, and reviewed records, enabling us to uncover and address abuse, neglect, and other rights violations. Our attorneys provided representation or guidance to 23 individuals facing abuse and neglect—the majority of them were living in an institutional setting.

Our monitoring work uncovers systemic failures that require legal action. For example, in *Cooper v. Greenstein*, DRLA provides legal representation for adults with mental illness who were charged with a crime but found not guilty by reason of insanity or incompetent to stand trial. Courts have ordered these individuals to receive needed care and treatment in a state psychiatric hospital. Instead, they often have faced prolonged confinement in jail due to lack of bed space. DRLA and the MacArthur Justice Center continue work to enforce a settlement agreement with the Louisiana Department of Health to limit these wait times. To increase bed space and respond to our work on this matter, LDH recently contracted with a private facility to increase treatment capacity.

We monitored facilities housing approximately 5,277 adults and children with disabilities. Our presence and actions to defend individual residents' rights often ripple outward into policy and practice changes that have the potential to protect all residents.

healthcare

We're fighting to keep people with disabilities healthy and in their communities.

Adults with disabilities are 4 times more likely to report fair or poor health than people without disabilities.

Our advocates helped 23 people with developmental disabilities address service gaps in their home-based Medicaid waiver services—helping them access care, improve housing, strengthen communication with care teams, and increase autonomy to stay safely in their communities.

Our attorneys provided 45 people with disabilities with legal representation and guidance to help them get the care they need—from critical home-health services, to power wheelchairs, to ABA therapy.

AJ v. Greenstein is a class action suit that DRLA filed against the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) for failing to provide approved in-home skilled nursing services for children who receive services under Medicaid developmental disability waivers, causing hospitalizations and risk of institutionalization. Under a court-approved settlement extension, LDH agreed to continue making changes aimed at ensuring access to these critical services including: maintain enhanced reimbursement rates for pediatric skilled nursing to address staffing gaps, operate a Crisis Response Team for class members to address urgent staffing concerns, collaborate with DRLA on developing training materials to improve support coordinators' ability to secure nursing services, and provide monthly reports so we

could monitor and address emerging barriers to accessing these services.

Our policy team and coalition partners in the Live at Home LA Coalition successfully advocated for 750 additional adult Medicaid waiver slots. These new slots will improve health and independence outcomes for 750 people who will be able to live in the community instead of institutions.

This also saves the state millions: Medicaid spends approximately \$60,000 per year for home & community-based waiver services—\$35,377 less than the average cost of nursing home care in Louisiana.⁹

We directly empowered 60 individuals through advocacy and legal representation. Our class action and policy work have the potential to expand healthcare access for thousands more—keeping people with disabilities in their communities.

employment

We're helping the disability community close the employment gap.

23% of people with disabilities are employed—nearly 1/3 the rate of people without disabilities.¹⁰

Our benefits counselors empowered 338 Social Security disability beneficiaries to pursue job opportunities, by showing them how work would affect their benefits. Some learned they could replace their benefits with earnings; others discovered their benefits wouldn't change. This information enabled them to pursue jobs that would lead to greater financial security.

Our advocates connected 75 job seekers to the job training, technology, and education through Louisiana Rehabilitation Services. By asking the right questions and advocating for their clients' dreams and skills, we helped open doors to competitive career paths.

Our financial coaches and case managers helped 52 formerly incarcerated people with disabilities achieve financial security and remain in the community. They focused on financial literacy, housing, healthcare, job-readiness and other basic needs before helping clients land jobs. Over 50% of clients secured jobs, while two-thirds reduced their debt by \$28,878 collectively. The financial gains these clients won resulted in \$400,000+ back into the economy last year.

Our attorneys provided 39 people with legal representation and guidance to protect them from employer discrimination, help them fight for reasonable

accommodations, and secure denied services and resources that would empower them to work.

We empowered 504 job seekers with disabilities to address their employment barriers so they could become more financially secure, less dependent on public benefits, and put money back into the economy.

Our non-legal staff help people with disabilities enter the job market by addressing barriers early. Our attorneys step in when legal issues threaten those jobs.

access

We're breaking down barriers so people with disabilities can fully participate in their communities.

People with disabilities face significant barriers to participation in their communities. For example: less than 5% of housing is accessible to older Americans with disabilities¹¹; one-third of people with disabilities have difficulty accessing transportation as-needed¹²; and people with disabilities are three times more likely to face voting barriers¹³. In 2025, DRLA engaged in individual and systemic work to address access issues like these.

DRLA attorneys provided 45 people with guidance or legal representation when they faced access issues. These cases involved working with landlords to make homes accessible to tenants with disabilities, getting retail store owners to ensure customers with disabilities can access their stores, and securing reasonable accommodations from medical practitioners.

We surveyed several polling places on major election days to ensure people with disabilities could vote. DRLA participated in the Louisiana Senate Committee on Senate and Governmental Affairs Task Force on Ensuring Voter Participation in the Political Process and a voting rights strategy group with the NAACP and Power Coalition, to raise and address barriers for voters with disabilities.

DRLA serves on the Project Advisory Committee for the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority's Universal Accessibility Study, working to improve transit accessibility for riders with disabilities across all bus, streetcar, and ferry services.

We provided training for lawyers and law students on how to make their services accessible to clients with disabilities. Through the Louisiana State Bar Association's Legal Services for Persons with Disabilities Committee and Accessibility Committee, we are collaborating with the Louisiana Supreme Court's Office of Language Access on a bench book that will provide guidance on best

practices when a person with a disability is engaging in the court system.

We directly served 45 individuals facing access barriers in their communities. Our efforts around court accessibility, expanding voting access, and enhancing public transit has the potential to impact thousands more people with disabilities.

autonomy

We're fighting for the right to self-determination.

Approximately 1.5 million adults are under interdiction or guardianship

Threats to autonomy take many forms. Under interdiction, people with disabilities lose the right to make decisions about their own lives—including where to live, whether to get medical treatment, whom to see, and even what to eat.

DRLA provided 21 individuals with legal representation and guidance when they faced challenges to their autonomy. In some cases it meant advocating for clients' rights to live where they want or handle their hygiene and personal care. In other cases it meant protecting them from having all of their decision-making power taken from them through interdictions.

In Intermediate Care Facilities for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, we handled 286 complaints related to residents' autonomy—including the right to communicate with others privately, watch TV, attend church, access personal funds, allow visitors, and refuse medical treatment.

We completed a systemic investigation, examining how coroners are issuing Coroner's Emergency Certificates to initiate 15 day involuntary hospitalizations for acute mental health care. We identified patterns of unnecessary institutionalization and violations of due process based on disability—resulting in individuals with disabilities being held against their will across Louisiana. We provided testimony to the Louisiana Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights for their investigation into the role of coroners in involuntary commitments, resulting in a report and recommendations for how Louisiana should rethink this system.

In partnership with the Arc of Louisiana, we provided trainings to community members on alternatives to interdiction or tutorships, including: Special Education Transfer of Rights, Power of Attorney, Supported Decision Making, Advanced Directives, Representative Payee, Joint Bank Accounts, Special Needs Trusts, ABLE Act, and Medical Consent Law.

We directly served 21 individuals facing challenges to their autonomy and resolved 286 autonomy complaints in institutional settings. Our investigation and testimony has the potential to reform the involuntary hospitalization system. We're helping preserve autonomy, offering less restrictive alternatives to interdiction and tutorship through training.

finance

In Fiscal Year 2025, we invested \$4,989,959 in protecting, empowering, and advocating for our disability community.

How we used these funds:

82% of our expenditures directly supported client services.

18% covered administrative costs to support our staff, manage statewide operations, and ensure financial stewardship.

Our funding sources:

Federal Agencies - \$2,561,536

State of Louisiana - \$1,046,639

Unrestricted Reserves - \$729,049

Private Philanthropy - \$452,735

City Government - \$200,000

Federal	51%
State	21%
Private	9%
City	4%
Reserves	15%

DRLA's work in 2025 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. Additionally, DRLA's work was supported by grants from the State of Louisiana, the City of New Orleans, private funders and donors, and unrestricted reserves from awards in prior years.

This publication does not constitute an official communication, or represent the views, positions or policies of, or the endorsements by any of our funders, including these federal agencies.

We are grateful to the following private institutions and city governments whose one-time and multi-year partnerships supported DRLA's work in 2025 and beyond.

Baptist Community Ministries
The Yield Giving Foundation
The Louisiana Bar Foundations
The Greater New Orleans Foundation
Loyola University College of Law Gillis Long Poverty Center
Gayle and Tom Benson Charitable Foundation
Keller Family Foundation
Tulane University
The City of New Orleans
Lever for Change

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SUPPORTERS

We are grateful to the following private institutions & city governments whose one-time & multi-year partnerships supported DRLA's work in 2025 & beyond.

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 2

Monica Stampley, Vice Chair, District 4

Tamara Cannon, Treasurer, District 1

Kathryn Lafrentz, Secretary, District 2

Tamar Baskind, District 2

Gisele Celestine, District 3

Leslie Durham, District 5

Barksdale Hortenstine, Jr., District 2

Shontae T. Johnson, District 5
Shanese Lewis, District 3
Byrne Sherwood, District 2
Robyn Guillen, District 1

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.

Byrne Sherwood
Matt Bailey
Eddie Jenkins
Jessica Sawyer
Anthony Marino
Eva Pesta
Ronell Day
Ashely McReynolds
Dr. Sadie Doll

Our work is also made possible by the individual donors, volunteers, and community partners who stand with us every day.

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