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Central Jersey Legal Services

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Annual Report

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2023

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Central Jersey  
**Legal Services**  
Inc.



# 2023 IN REVIEW

Central Jersey  
Legal Services  
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## *75 Years in Practice*

**2023 marked CJLS's 75th year in practice.** Our predecessor organization, The Legal Aid Society of Mercer County, was founded in 1948 to make the legal system more accessible to low-income people and even the playing field for those who could not otherwise afford an attorney. CJLS is proud of our long history of working to ensure that justice for all means Justice for All. Too many New Jerseyans cannot afford the legal help they need when faced with life-changing situations such as domestic violence, unlawful eviction, or the loss of health benefits. In 2023, CJLS lawyers and paralegals provided more than 21,000 people the legal counsel they needed to get a fair shot at justice.

For clients like Kyra and Ronny whose stories you'll read later in this report, there's no extra money to pay an attorney for legal advice or representation. Without CJLS their only option is to go to court without legal help. That puts them at a disadvantage from the start. Our civil justice system isn't designed for use by people without lawyers. The same is true of the criminal justice system, where we guarantee the right to an attorney for anyone who can't afford one on their own. No such right exists in civil court, even though the stakes are just as high. Basic needs – shelter, income, food, health care, safety, and the right to parent one's children – are all litigated in civil court.

Over the last year, CJLS helped substantially more clients than in previous years to navigate the complexities of the civil justice system. Attorneys and paralegals closed more than 9,000 cases - 16% more than in 2022 and 65% more than in 2019, before the pandemic.

### **In 2023 CJLS attorneys and paralegals:**

- Closed 4,655 Housing cases, protecting the rights of low-income families to safe, stable housing they can afford.
- Helped parents obtain custody and support and domestic violence victims secure court protection in 1,808 Family cases.
- Handled 1,071 Public Entitlements cases, ensuring low-income families access to housing, income, and nutrition benefits, fighting for workers seeking unemployment insurance, and representing people with disabilities seeking Social Security benefits.
- Closed 1,109 Consumer cases, protecting clients from fraud and helping them to resolve excessive or unlawful debt.

Significantly more people are reaching out to CJLS for help. New applications for service are at levels we haven't seen in 15 years. We're determined to uphold the legacy of the last 75 years and work for a civil justice system where no one is disadvantaged by income and equal justice under the law is more than just a promise.

# CASES IN 2023

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# 9,066

## Cases Closed

1,240 more cases than 2022

# 11,412

## Total Intakes

1,268 Intakes Completed Online

# 2,435

## Extended Service/Litigation Cases Closed

# 6,631

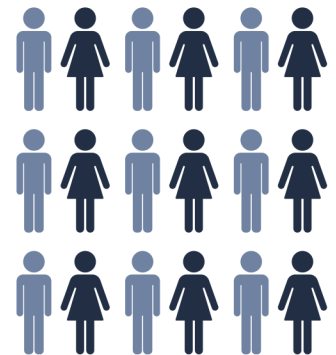
## Counsel and Advice Cases Closed

## Closed Cases by County

Mercer  
2,238

Middlesex  
2,299

Union  
3,829



### Total Served

# 21,753

Clients & household  
members

Housing  
4,655

Family  
1,808

Consumer  
1,109

Income  
1,071

## Closed Cases by Problem Areas

# CLIENTS IN 2023

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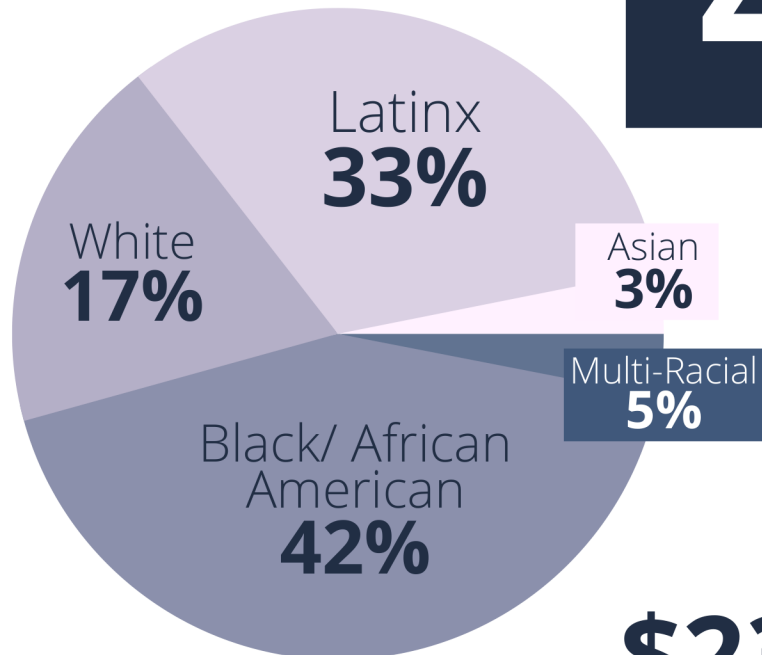


## Client Demographics



**AVERAGE  
AGE**

**47**



**\$23,715**  
Client Average Household  
Income

**2,462**  
clients living with a  
**physical or mental disability**

**2023 clients spoke  
25 different  
languages**

American Sign Language Arabic Bengali  
Chinese Cantonese English Farsi French  
French Creole Gujarathi Haitian Creole  
Hindi Hungarian Korean Malayalam Other  
Polish Portuguese Punjabi Russian Spanish  
Tamil Turkish Urdu Vietnamese

# CASE OUTCOMES

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**146**

victims of domestic  
violence secured a  
protective order

**837**

clients avoided eviction  
and maintained  
affordable housing

**375**

clients secured  
child custody and  
support

**370**

clients secured disability,  
unemployment, and  
other benefits

**239**

clients reduced or  
eliminated excessive  
and unlawful debt

**134**

clients accessed health  
care services and  
estate planning

# CJLS Provided

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## 1,949

Community Members with Legal Information  
through Outreach Events and Workshops.



Pro Bono Attorneys Donated

## 1,390<sup>hrs</sup>

of Legal Work in Cases for  
CJLS Clients.



Community  
members watched

## 77.9<sup>hrs</sup>

of CJLS' self-help  
video series

"Breaking it Down"

# CLIENT STORIES

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## Tanya

Tanya moved out of her old apartment before the lease was up as part of a settlement agreement with her landlord. They agreed that Tanya would vacate early and her landlord would waive back rent. After Tanya moved out her landlord sued her for \$13,000 in back rent and she called CJLS for help. CJLS helped Tanya beat the suit using an Appellate Division decision meant to bar tenants from suing landlords after a settlement in landlord/tenant court. The decision in Tanya's case flipped that decision to bar her landlord from suing Tanya. Tanya avoided having to pay a significant debt that she should not owe and that would have been a severe financial burden for her family.

## Stella

Stella and her son left Puerto Rico to escape her abusive stepfather. They moved in with a friend, but he threw her out in the middle of the night when she refused his advances. She applied for emergency shelter and was denied. Stella came to CJLS for help getting shelter for her family. A CJLS attorney and paralegal worked together to get assistance for Stella. They submitted details of the abuse she endured first by her stepfather and then by her friend that resulted in her homelessness. Stella was given a shelter placement and approved for Medicaid, food assistance, and cash benefits. With advocacy from CJLS, Stella found some stability after fleeing abuse in Puerto Rico. She had shelter for her family, food and income assistance, and Medical coverage so she did not run out of medication for her epilepsy.

# CLIENT STORIES

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## Will

Will was disabled and managed to pay his rent with Social Security benefits. When his benefits were abruptly terminated, Will fell behind on rent. He applied for General Assistance but it was not enough to pay rent and buy food. CJLS helped Will get his rent adjusted based on his new income. We helped him secure Emergency Assistance and appeal the termination of his disability benefits. Will was able to stay in his apartment with a rent he could afford.

## Kyra

Kyra was an unauthorized immigrant with a 5-month old son. Her husband abused her physically and emotionally. CJLS helped her secure a Final Restraining Order, overcome an eviction action, secure court permission to relocate out of state, and file an immigration petition so she could remain in the U.S. with her child. She is making a fresh start in a new state with her son. She emailed her attorney from their new home and said, "I attached some photos of my son for you to see how happy he is and how much of an impact you helped make in his life fighting for us."

## Luna

Luna was a single mom who was unemployed and looking for work. She had a housing subsidy to help with rent. Her landlord raised her rent but her subsidy continued to pay the original rent and her landlord filed to evict her over the difference. When Luna offered to pay the amount of the difference her landlord made unreasonable demands for additional amounts, including illegal fees. Luna called CJLS for help. When Luna's landlord realized she had an attorney, he backed off the additional amounts and fees. We were able to negotiate an agreement that included a reasonable rent increase, no fees, and a cap on the increase for next term. Luna's family kept their home and avoided a costly eviction judgment.



# CLIENT STORIES

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## Ronny

Ronny was homeless after fleeing an abusive relationship. He was denied emergency assistance benefits and shelter placement and was staying where he could, in motel rooms, with friends, or on very cold nights, in Code Blue shelters. CJLS appealed his shelter denial and an attorney represented Ronny at his fair hearing. The judge ruled that Ronny was eligible for benefits. He got a shelter placement and cash benefits so he wasn't sleeping on the street and could work on building a new life in New Jersey.

## Jackie

Jackie was a retired veteran who was evicted after he missed his court date. He was at risk of becoming homeless and losing his housing assistance. CJLS helped him to apply for housing assistance for veterans. Jackie was hospitalized and received a lockout notice soon after returning home. CJLS helped him delay the lockout and secure the housing assistance he needed. Jackie kept his apartment and his housing subsidy.

## Alyssa

After Alyssa broke up with her boyfriend he started stalking her. He followed her home or waited outside for her to arrive. She had to outrun him to get inside safely. Then he broke into her house when she was out. He stole documents and left threatening notes. Alyssa was terrified and fled to a shelter. She applied for a restraining order and came to CJLS for representation. Alyssa and her CJLS attorney assembled significant evidence to prove a pattern of stalking and harassment and establish the need for a protective order. After a three-day trial, a judge found that a restraining order was necessary to keep Alyssa safe. Alyssa's attorney helped her apply for victims' assistance funds to assist with relocation costs. She left her apartment and started over in a location where he could not find her.