

2024 Program Outputs: Your Dollars at Work

669

people served by
BLC



\$397,416

In back pay was
awarded to clients
thanks to BLC
advocates



85%

Of BLC's cases
ended in favorable
decisions



OUR TAGLINE **Overcoming economic insecurity through advocacy**



“ BOARD MEMBER, WILL LIVESLEY-O'NEILL: WHAT INSPIRES ME

I'm inspired every day by the fierce determination of BLC's clients and staff to fight for justice even as our systems fail them. Now more than ever, we need a determined belief in the rights of every person to be housed, healthy, and secure. When clients assert their rights, and when BLC fills a critical but often overlooked legal need on their behalf, that belief spreads and inspires others.

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A letter from the Executive Director

Dear BLC Community,

In 2024, our clients continued to face significant hardship due to the worsening delays, backlogs, and extreme wait times at the Social Security Administration (SSA). The system remains in crisis: by the end of the fiscal year, over 300,000 disability appeals were still pending. For individuals applying for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), the average wait time for an initial decision was between 6 to 8 months, which was followed by a mandatory 5-month waiting period before benefits begin.



For clients forced to appeal denied claims, the delays were even more staggering – approximately 7 months for reconsideration, and an additional 15 months to receive a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge. In total, the journey from initial application to a final decision can stretch beyond a year to several years, leaving vulnerable individuals without critical income and support during this time.

Exacerbating these challenges, SSA field office staffing reached a 50-year low, creating an agency that is virtually inaccessible to the people who need it most. Our clients encountering benefit interruptions or administrative errors were forced to endure unreasonable wait times and struggled to communicate with an overburdened system.

Despite these systemic barriers, BLC stood firm. We provided dedicated, high-quality legal advocacy, ensuring that our clients didn't have to navigate this demoralizing process alone. In 2024, BLC entered a new phase of growth and transition, hiring two new attorneys and one paralegal. Their energy and passion have strengthened our capacity and reaffirmed our commitment to our mission.

In response to SSA's mounting dysfunction, BLC intensified its focus on systemic advocacy. With more clients than ever needing support and fewer resources to meet the demand, our team pursued multiple strategies: policy reform, direct engagement with SSA leadership, and impact litigation. These efforts require persistent, creative, and strategic communication. Even as SSA processing remains painfully slow, BLC attorneys have continued to secure favorable outcomes for clients, and we've prioritized expanded counsel and advice services to address urgent community needs.

We also leveraged collaboration—working with legal aid partners and escalating unresolved cases through the SSA Regional Communications Director—to move stuck cases forward and deliver results. Systems advocacy has been a key tool to improve both the pace and fairness of SSA case decisions.

Community engagement remained central to our mission in 2024. BLC conducted 11 trainings, reaching more than 350 community members with legal education and guidance. We supported social service providers, legal aid attorneys, and community partners, emphasizing the intersectionality of public benefits with other legal issues. Our revitalized volunteer and pro bono program further amplified our reach and cultivated a shared commitment to justice.

We also celebrated important victories in 2024, which speak to the real, tangible impact of our work. BLC attorneys successfully advocated for \$86,195 in overpayments to be reversed; \$397,416 in back pay to be awarded; and our clients received \$32,917 in new benefits to help them meet their monthly needs. These wins translate directly into housing, healthcare, food, and stability for our clients.

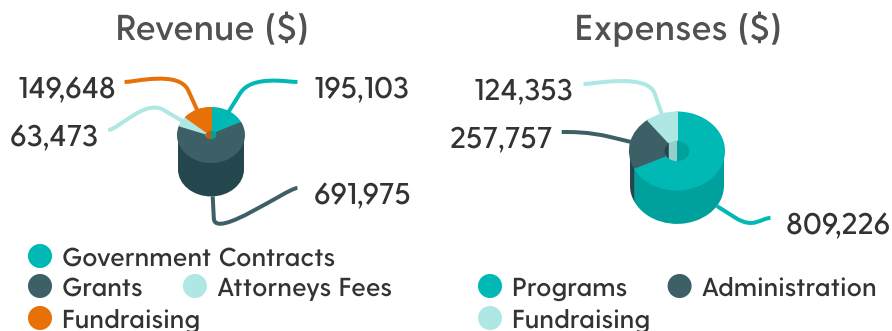
Take Darren, for example. After years of homelessness and mental health challenges, Darren spent years appealing a denied disability claim. With BLC's help, he prevailed at hearing and received over \$35,000 in backpay. Or Parker, who also faced homelessness and severe mental illness. With BLC's legal advocacy, Parker obtained a fully favorable decision and – thanks to our partnerships – moved into subsidized housing with a steady SSI income.

These stories are not exceptions – they are proof. Proof that access to justice is not just an ideal, but a powerful tool for transforming lives. In the face of immense systemic barriers, BLC continues to fight for equity, dignity, and hope. Our work has never been more necessary – or more impactful.

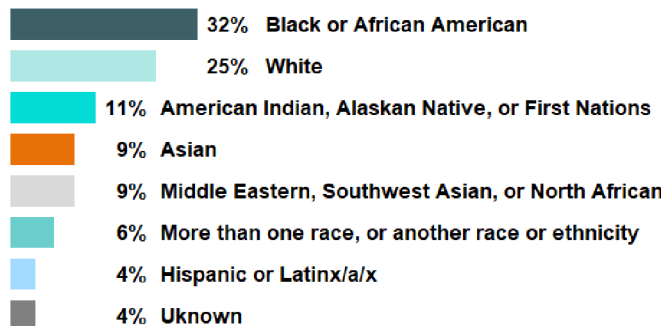
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huy Nguyen'.

Huy Nguyen

2024 Financials



2024 Client Demographics



16,385

Individuals in King County on any given night experienced homelessness in 2024

51%

Of homeless people in King County identify as having a disability

31%

Of homeless people in King County identify as having a mental health disorder

\$397,416

In back pay was awarded to clients thanks to BLC

\$32,917

benefits awarded to clients in 2024 so people who did not previously have benefits can meet their monthly expenses



Robert's Story, Client

Robert is a client that came to BLC in May 2023, through our regular outreach work with Downtown Emergency Services (DESC). BLC Directing Attorney, Hillary Lovell, performs outreach and assistance at DESC's office in Pioneer Square to people living with disabilities who are homeless. Through our Disabled Homeless Advocacy Project (DHAP), launched in 2006, our attorneys help BIPOC clients like Robert who may be eligible for SSI/SSDI benefits, both before and after they have begun the application process.

Robert started working with Hillary after the Social Security Administration (SSA) denied his first appeal of his Supplemental Security Income (SSI) application. He was in his 40s and a single father of two small children. DESC helped him find

subsidized housing with room for his children. However, due to his mental health challenges – including extreme PTSD, anxiety, and a stress induced speech disorder – he was unable to maintain employment. Hillary immediately started working with Robert and his DESC case management team to compile supporting evaluations, letters of support, and other evidence to support his disability claim at an SSA hearing, a process that took nine long months.

SSA finally scheduled Robert's hearing in April of 2024, and things started looking up quickly from there. Within a week, the judge returned a fully favorable decision determining that Robert qualified as "disabled" under SSA's regulations. Robert then had a meeting with the local SSA field office who awarded him monthly checks of \$943 in benefits (the amount that an individual is eligible for SSI in 2024), as well as backpay for nearly three years equating to approximately \$30,000. Robert's experience is an example of just how brave and



patient our clients are to reach a positive outcome – he did not give up and persisted with his appeal for nearly three years all while managing his disabling conditions and parenting two small children. His story also highlights just how important our community outreach is with other services providers across the Puget Sound.



BLC is grateful to the Legal Foundation of Washington (LFW) for their **one-time Accelerator grant of \$45,000**. In the first funding round of 2024, LFW awarded eight legal aid organizations across Washington State with one-time grants to accelerate time-sensitive civil justice work and launch impactful projects. BLC was given this funding because we are a strong anti-racist organization focused on serving historically excluded communities throughout the Puget Sound.



LFW's grant allowed us to purchase a new cargo van to convert into our highly effective Justice Bus – Washington's only mobile legal unit. With our Bus, we will provide free legal services directly to hundreds of disproportionately under-resourced communities in need at times and places where legal services are not offered – most particularly to Native/Indigenous people and communities in service deserts across the Puget Sound.

300

Hours of pro bono advocacy from volunteer attorneys was gifted to clients

BLC helped

32%

of clients to advocate for themselves in their own cases

People given legal education through community trainings and information fairs

374



\$86,195

in overpayments were reversed or waived thanks to BLC

BLC is proud to announce our new Applications Clinic established last year in partnership with students from the University of Washington's School of Social Work. Starting in October 2024, two students from the school began committing roughly 30 hours per week at our office to work with our clients on our waitlist for services. The **goal of their efforts is to help individuals and families with disabilities to submit online applications for Social Security Income and Social Security Disability Income.** This support is crucial for our clients who have difficulties in using the SSA's online applications portal because it is complex to navigate with its depth of questions and requirements, and an even greater challenge to use when living with mental and/or physical disabilities. Applications take anywhere from 3 – 5 hours to complete. And most of our clients don't have regular access to computers unless our program can provide it.

This new layer of staffing and support at BLC could not come at a better time, as the paper system for applying for benefits with Social Security is becoming obsolete – and the obligation to apply online has become the norm. Without our clinic, BLC's clients would have to wait months to gain an appointment with a local Social Security office to complete their forms. Our clinic speeds up their application submittal time; and if their applications run into greater complications (as a majority of them do), they are often times paired with our benefits attorneys for support through the ensuing judicial processes.

Our Applications Clinic was initiated by Alex Strout, a five-year paralegal with BLC. Alex himself is a graduate of the UW School of Social Work and he has a Master of Social Work. Familiar with the school's practicum programming which requires students to spend 30 weeks working in the field prior to graduation, Alex envisioned this clinic as a way to both help students complete their practicum credit while simultaneously increasing BLC's capacity and resources to support more clients needing our services. Without our assistance, many applicants will fail to complete their applications and give up.

When our clinic concludes in June 2025, our interns will have helped approximately 30 households complete applications for enrollment in Social Security supports.

Grace Matthews

2024 Volunteer of the Year



Every year BLC recognizes one volunteer for their outstanding commitment to, and passion for, our Social Security advocacy and representation of the clients that we serve. In reflection of 2024, Grace Cameron Matthews is BLC's Volunteer of the Year. Grace became acquainted with our work through a family friend, and she worked as an intern for BLC during the summer of 2024 when she was in between her junior and senior years at Stanford University where she is majoring in political science and minoring in Spanish. In 2024, federal laws changed so that residents of the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) in the U.S. are now eligible to receive federal benefits including Supplemental

Security Income (SSI). Grace conducted research on cultural and language barriers experienced by COFA members in accessing public assistance.

After returning to college this past fall, Grace has continued to support BLC through research on policies that will support formerly and currently incarcerated people, to gain access to public assistance including Social Security. After college, Grace is preparing to work in direct service or policy roles with the social justice sector before heading to law school.

When asked how she enjoyed working for BLC, Grace said: **"During my time at BLC, I was continuously impressed by the depth of knowledge, dedication, and compassion demonstrated by the team. Their commitment to not only understanding the intricacies of the legal and benefits systems but also to supporting their clients with genuine care left a lasting impact on me!"**

2024 Community Partnerships

Chief Seattle Club
Seattle Indian Health Board
Mary's Place
REACH
North Shore Senior Center
DESC
Northwest Justice Project
NWIRP
King County Veteran's Program
Team Child
Harborview
Open Doors for Multicultural Families
SKCCH
Solid Ground
Compass Housing
Eastside Legal Assistance
Unemployment Law Program





Welcome to New Board Member, Dr. Susan Y. Lee

In 2024, BLC welcomed Dr. Susan Y. Lee to our Board of Directors. She is always looking for opportunities to give back in a community that she was raised in as an immigrant, having moved to Seattle from China at the age of five. Growing up in a low-income household with non-English speaking parents, she had to translate for her parents for years just to do the most basic of things. As a result, she is keenly aware of the struggles that multicultural families face with linguistic and financial barriers to services – and what an immigrant child faces in learning the culture

and gaining an education in the U.S. This makes her a perfect fit for her role as Senior Director of Education at nonprofit Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) where she oversees 70 bilingual teaching staff at three early learning sites throughout King County, operating on a \$5 million budget. She is currently managing the capital campaigns to establish two more licensed daycare / preschool facilities for ReWA in September 2025. ReWA is a nationally recognized nonprofit that provides holistic services in more than 50 languages to help refugee and immigrant women and families thrive.

Having completed her Doctor of Education at Seattle University last year as well, she joined our board with the desire to share her expertise from both the nonprofit and corporate worlds. Dr. Lee brings an abundance of know-how in the form of nonprofit strategic planning, human resources, budgeting, corporate social responsibility, and program development. Invited by the mayor, she was asked to join the Levy Oversight Committee seven years ago where she has gained insight into how levy funds are monitored, tracked, and distributed as promised to voters. She is also able to impart her collaborative partnership building knowledge with BLC, having developed long-lasting and unique partnerships for ReWA's preschool programming including but not limited to: a 10-year collaboration with UW School of Nursing to learn about population health and work directly with communities of color to better understand the disparities that they encounter; and a partnership formed in the midst of COVID with the One Roof Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Seattle Kraken and Climate Pledge Arena, to teach more than 60 preschoolers, 3-5 years of age, how to skate as youth of color on the ice.

A part of BLC's Communications Strategic Planning Committee, Dr. Lee is also a sought-after public speaker in the Puget Sound. She most often speaks of her pursuit of strong racial equity frameworks to eliminate the opportunity gaps caused by historical and systematic biases. She has been making headway towards that goal at ReWA so refugee and immigrant families can achieve inclusion and equal access to affordable childcare, basic needs, housing, and family support.

Asked why she was motivated to join BLC's board, she said, **"After walking along side underserved immigrant and refugee communities for the past decade, I admire the vision of BLC to help underserved communities that are striving to advocate for themselves. Everybody should have support in navigating the complex Social Security benefits system, especially people with disabilities who also have limited English language skills."**

Special thanks to our 2024 Sponsors



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