

Cries for justice have now rung out from all corners of our state as citizens take to the streets to demand racial justice. The Ohio Poverty Law Center stands with these peaceful protestors; Ohio cannot wait another day to begin making reforms to address systemic racism. Our mission to expand the legal rights of Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty remains clear. We cannot and will not ignore the role systemic racism plays in keeping people of color trapped in a perpetual cycle of poverty.



2020 Annual Report

2020 isn't the
end of the
World It's the
Start of a new
one ♡



OPLC
Ohio Poverty Law Center

Our Mission

The Ohio Poverty Law Center's mission is to reduce poverty and increase justice by protecting and expanding the legal rights of Ohioans living, working and raising their families in poverty.

We advocate for policies to reduce poverty and increase access to opportunities and justice for all Ohioans. We draw on the day-to-day experiences of Ohio's legal aid attorneys who provide free civil legal services to low-income Ohioans to drive our policy agenda. From improving access to health care to removing barriers to employment, we focus on changing and addressing systems and policies that keep people in poverty.

The **Ohio Poverty Law Center** (OPLC) is pleased to present its 2020 annual report. Despite unprecedented challenges this year, we are proud of our achievements and the progress made on behalf of Ohioans living in poverty. Under the umbrella of Ohio State Legal Services Association, OPLC works with, and on behalf of, legal aid practitioners and clients across the state. OPLC brings their voices to state policymakers in the legislature and administration.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how we worked, communicated, and advocated for policy changes. In addition to making progress on the priorities that we identified early in 2020, we pivoted to advocate for Ohioans who experienced economic hardship due to loss of income and employment and health-related issues.

In this report, you will see how OPLC continues to improve the lives of low-income Ohioans through advocacy and information sharing. From championing policies designed to respond to the pandemic, and promote family stability, health, and education, to supporting policies that remove barriers to employment, OPLC made a difference.

Please continue to support OPLC as we work to bring about sound public policies that build up our state's most vulnerable people.



In appreciation of your support,

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Responding to the Pandemic

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, we knew that the economic fallout would impact the poorest Ohioans the hardest. What we did not anticipate was how long the pandemic would last and how long and how devastating it would be. We also did not know that the virus' toll would be so inequitable—with Black Ohioans contracting and dying from the disease at higher rates than their White counterparts.

In response to the crisis, OPLC ramped up our efforts to ensure that Ohioans could stay safe in their homes, access benefits, and have the supports that they needed.

We successfully advocated for money for rent assistance. We pushed for more user-friendly changes to state and federal benefit systems and processes. We helped people keep their unemployment benefits when faced with health challenges or unsafe work environments.

At right: Franklin County Eviction Court at the Columbus Convention Center.



Ohio invested

\$50 million

of its Coronavirus Relief Funds
in emergency rental assistance
to prevent evictions through
the Home Relief Grant program.

Congress passed
an additional relief
package that
included more than

\$778 million

for Ohioans at-risk
of eviction or utility
disconnects.

 Development Services Agency

For more information, visit
BusinessHelp.Ohio.Gov



Home Relief Grant

Overview

The state of Ohio will allocate \$50 million from the Coronavirus Relief Fund from the CARES Act to 47 Community Action Agencies to help Ohioans that have experienced economic hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each Community Action Agency will receive a portion of the funding based on their Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) CARES Act allocation.

Ohioans who are behind on rent, mortgage, and water and/or sewer utility bills may be able to receive assistance. Assistance can be applied to outstanding rent, mortgage, water, and/or sewer bills back to April 1, 2020. Ohioans can receive monthly assistance until the program ends on December 30, 2020.

For utility bills that include more than the water or sewer services, assistance can be provided to maintain service or prevent shut off only.

The Community Action Agencies will make direct payments on behalf of the applicant to the landlord, bank, or water and/or sewer company. A household can receive assistance in more than one category.

Application Process

Ohioans will apply for assistance through their local Community Action Agency starting November 2, 2020. Ohioans can find their local Community Action Agency by visiting BusinessHelp.Ohio.Gov.

Ohio households with an annual income at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines will be eligible for assistance. For a family of four, that is an annual income up to \$52,400. Individuals that are currently unemployed will only need to provide proof of income for the last 30 days for verification purposes. Additionally, any federal unemployment stipend is excluded from determining a household's benefit.



When they apply:

- Proof of income for all household members 18 years or older for a minimum of the past 30 days
- Any supporting documentation to demonstrate need
- Hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Also:

- Landlord verification/proof of ownership and agreement to receive funds
- Lease agreement

Provide:

To receive Utility Assistance, they will also need to provide:

- Copy of utility bill demonstrating the account has been shut off, is in disconnect status or is past due

Assistance Available

The funding may be distributed among rental assistance (homeless/eviction prevention, re-housing assistance, or security deposit assistance), mortgage assistance, and water and/or sewer utility assistance.

 Development Services Agency

For more information, visit
BusinessHelp.Ohio.Gov



Governor Mike DeWine signed HB 263 on January 10, 2021.

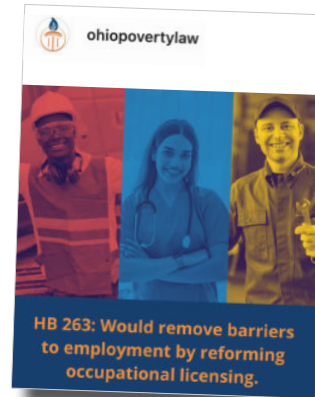
Providing Opportunities for a Fresh Start through New Legislation

Removing barriers to employment continues to be a focus of our work. In 2020, we made significant progress in increasing employment opportunities for individuals with criminal records by addressing the more than 850 laws and rules that prevent them from holding certain jobs. Nearly two million Ohioans face barriers due to their criminal record, disproportionately affecting low-income people and communities of color, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Licensed occupations account for one in four jobs and usually come with higher pay.

We identified House Bill 263, sponsored by Representative Kyle Koehler (R-Springfield), as one of our must-pass bills for the year and worked hard to see it enacted. The bill removes barriers to occupational licensing for individuals with criminal records. It requires licensing agencies to create lists of disqualifying offenses that are directly related to the duties and responsibilities of the licensed occupation. With just a few exceptions, when reviewing applications, licensing agencies can only consider those offenses for five years from the date of conviction or release from incarceration, whichever is latest.

House Bill 1, another piece of legislation we worked on, also made its way through the General Assembly. It broadens the scope of intervention in lieu of conviction and allows more eligible offenders to seal their criminal records.

These changes in Ohio law allow for a fresh start for Ohioans who have been involved with the criminal justice system.



The unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is nearly

5X

higher than the unemployment rate for the general United States population.



Advocating for School Discipline Policies that Support Academic Success

Sometimes, proposed legislation has good intentions but unintended consequences. OPLC coordinated efforts to educate lawmakers on the potential consequences of House Bill 310. This legislation would have required that students who committed acts of bullying face mandatory detention, in-school suspension, or out-of-school suspension. While these may seem like reasonable punishments, they are harmful because they prioritize removing a student from the classroom. Time spent in the classroom is the greatest predictor of academic success. Detention or suspension should be punishments of last resort, but this legislation made them the default. After we raised concerns at the committee hearing, the bill was not brought up for a vote.

Discipline policies are important to monitor because of their negative impact on Black students. Data collected by the U.S. Department of Education's Office For Civil Rights shows that Black students are more likely to be suspended from school than White students. Black male students represented eight percent of enrolled students and accounted for 25 percent of students who received an out-of-school suspension.

The Legal Aid Society of Columbus assisted Phuorever (at left) and his family in appealing a suspension and advocated that the school implement positive behavior interventions.



We have a *responsibility* to all of Ohio's children, both the bullied and the children who engage in bullying behavior, to make sure we are making school a *safe and welcoming environment* that *promotes and encourages learning.*"

- Tim Johnson, OPLC HB 310 testimony

Expanding Opportunities for Driver's License Reinstatements

House Bill 285 established a Driver's License Reinstatement Fee Debt Reduction and Amnesty Program through the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles. With momentum from the successful pilot program in 2019 that helped nearly 77,000 Ohioans with reinstatement fees, the legislature passed HB 285 and established a permanent program to help low-income Ohioans reinstate their licenses.

Up and running as of December 13, 2020, the program will assist people who cannot afford to pay all their pending reinstatement fees following a driver's license suspension. Through the program, eligible individuals can reinstate their driver's licenses after a suspension by paying reduced reinstatement fees. The BMV can waive all fees for eligible, low-income drivers.

IT'S HARD TO PROVIDE FOR A FAMILY OR
KEEP YOUR LOVED ONES SAFE WITHOUT A
VALID DRIVER'S LICENSE. NEED HELP
PAYING FEES AFTER A LICENSE
SUSPENSION?

A new program at the BMV is ready to help.



**Participants in the following
programs can receive
a full waiver of fees:**

- SNAP
- US Department of Veterans Affairs Pension Benefits Program
- Medicaid
- Ohio Works First
- SSI

***We are grateful for the support
from the following foundations:***



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1108 City Park Ave.
Suite 200
Columbus, OH 43206

614.827.0549
ohiopovertylawcenter.org