



*Building a Just Society*



Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i

2023 ANNUAL  
**REPORT**

July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023

# OUR MISSION

The mission of the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i is to address critical legal needs through high quality legal advocacy, outreach, and education in pursuit of fairness and justice.

# OUR VISION

"Building a Just Society"

# OUR COMMITMENTS

Justice, Equality, Integrity,  
Respect, Compassion and  
Excellence.



# MESSAGE FROM OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

***He ‘a‘ali‘i kū makani mai au; ‘a‘ohe makani nāna e kula‘i.***

*I am a wind-resisting ‘a‘ali‘i plant; no gust can push me over.*

For over 73 years, the Legal Aid Society of Hawai‘i has been consistent and steadfast in our pursuit of justice, inspired by the clients and communities we serve and anchored in the universal ideals of equity and fairness. Legal Aid’s longevity through consistently evolving societal landscapes comes from being resilient and adaptable while collaborating with stakeholders to direct resources to the always changing needs of Hawai‘i’s most vulnerable.

The “new normal” that has unfolded in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic brings a demand for services that continues to exceed pre-pandemic levels, and increased needs for housing and family stability. In 2023, Legal Aid responded to the new normal and made housing and family support priorities, with over 24% and 22% of closed cases, respectively, directed to address those critical needs. While legal assistance in and of itself is a laudable outcome that ensures everyone receives a “fair shake” in legal matters, our advocates continued to produce critical outcomes for clients, which included changes to housing providers’ fair housing policies, \$1.85 million in financial benefits to clients, and hundreds of positive outcomes protecting family homes, obtaining child custody, executing estate planning and protective documents for vulnerable kūpuna, promoting victim safety, and obtaining vital documents.

The challenges that our clients face are complex, which requires that we innovate and be flexible in meeting these dynamic times. Our technological and logistical ability to provide direct services, both in and out of court, in a “hybrid” manner is a net positive that helps ensure that those in need can receive legal assistance regardless of their ability to physically meet with an advocate or go to court. In FY23, we started and continued projects aimed to provide online access to legal information and documents to expand our outreach. Legal Aid is also proud to have obtained a local rule change to support a pilot project that expands the legal ability of para-professional “mission staff” to provide legal assistance and representation, which will help more individuals and families in our rural areas obtain legal representation.

Fiscal Year 2024 is bringing with it new leadership, opportunities, challenges, and community need. There will always be new programs, initiatives, and strategies. But, our commitment to justice, equality, and advocacy remains unwavering, and we will continue to utilize our experience and community standing, along with your continued partnership and support, to propel us into a future defined by innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity.

*Mahalo nui loa*



**DAVID KAUILA KOPPER**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



**REGAN IWAO**  
PRESIDENT,  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

# YEAR AT-A-GLANCE

# 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

We advocate for individuals on a personal level. One person at a time, we work tirelessly to ensure that everyone, regardless of national origin, background, status, or gender, has access to legal resources and representation. We believe that without justice and fairness, our Hawai'i community cannot experience stability, security and progress. By addressing individual cases, we contribute to the broader goal of fostering fairness and equality within the legal system and help usher in a future without discrimination.

Legal Aid has been the only statewide provider of civil legal services to low-income and moderate-income members of our community since 1950. We are proud to continue this pursuit today.



# 10 OFFICES STATEWIDE

# WHERE WE SERVE

From July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023, we closed a total of 6,740 cases throughout our offices on the islands of O'ahu, Kaua'i, Maui, Lāna'i, Moloka'i and Hawai'i Island.



KAUA'I  
476

MAUI  
509

HONOLULU  
3,997

MOLOKA'I  
95

LĀNA'I  
9

LEEWARD  
198

KONA  
187

HILO  
825

WINDWARD  
107

HAWAII IMMIGRANT  
JUSTICE CENTER (HIJC)  
AND PUBLIC BENEFITS

337



The ten office sites where Legal Aid is located place us in a unique position to ensure that legal services continue to be accessible in these communities, especially on the neighbor islands where access to other legal services is extremely limited.

LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF HAWAII

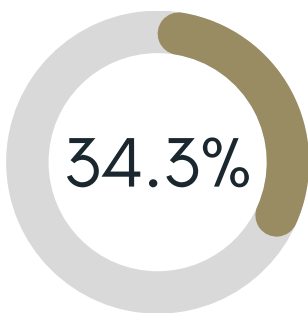
# PRIORITY POPULATIONS

## WHO WE SERVE

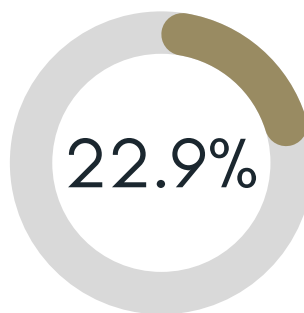
Legal Aid has been consistently focused on work relating to race equity, with a priority on defending the interests of Native Hawaiians for decades. In 2011, we added as a priority area “assisting culturally and linguistically isolated populations” which broadened our services to populations that were traditionally underserved and historically discriminated against.

The seniors in our communities are also a priority. Legal Aid’s Elder Law Services provides assistance to Hawai’i residents 60 and above with matters such as divorce, public benefits, guardianship, eviction, simple wills, powers of attorney, transfer on death deeds, probate, advance health care directives, or elder abuse.

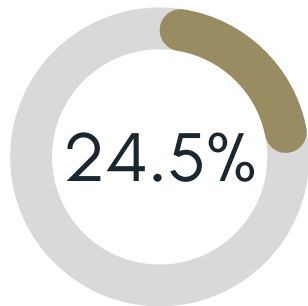
Currently, in almost one in five cases, the client was age 60 or older. We are equipped and ready to support them as we anticipate an increase in services needed among the elderly. Cases involving other specific populations include:



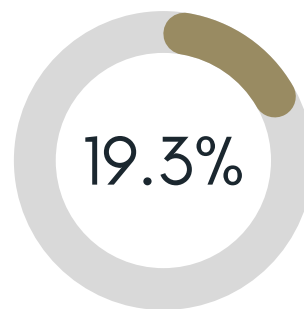
**Vulnerable seniors**



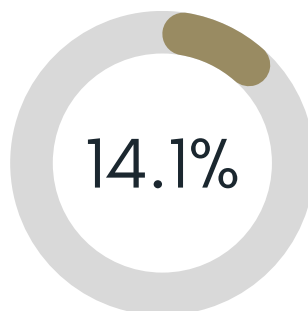
**Populations with special vulnerabilities (disabilities)**



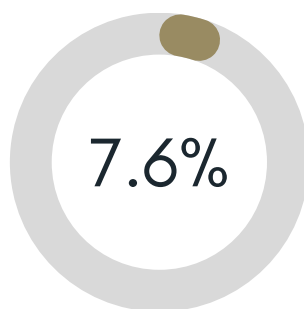
**Native Hawaiians**



**Victims of domestic violence or other crime**



**Houseless individuals or those at risk of becoming houseless**



**Culturally and linguistically isolated populations**



## LEGAL AID *in the news*

# HILO SELF-HELP CENTER RESUMES IN-PERSON ASSISTANCE AFTER PANDEMIC

The Hilo Self-Help Center, a partnership between the Hawai'i State Judiciary, the Hawai'i State Bar Association (HSBA), the Hawai'i County Bar Association (HCBA), and Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i, resumed its in-person service in April 2023.

Jacky Mena, Legal Aid volunteer attorney and HCBA managing liaison, welcomed the opportunity to personally interact with the community again.

“Resuming in-person services provides self-represented litigants with a wider range of resources in one centralized location,” says Jacky. “For example, an individual can meet with an attorney, access printed court forms, resource documents, court records, and submit filings while at the Hale Kaulike courthouse. While many of these resources are available online, many people do not have access to computers and printers, and coming to the courthouse gives them easy access to printed materials. In addition, in-person services allow individuals to show relevant documents to the volunteer attorney which facilitates more efficient and effective service.”

The Self-Help Center was originally created to help self-represented civil litigants obtain easier access to justice and legal services, according to Dawn West, Chief Court Administrator of the Third Circuit.

The Self-Help Center temporarily transitioned to online services during the pandemic.



*We are very pleased that our patrons will be able to speak to an attorney, do legal research, and pick up blank forms, file documents, and attend court in one trip all within the same building. Our patrons travel to court from all over the circuit/island, and being able to make everything central is a really important step in streamlining services.*

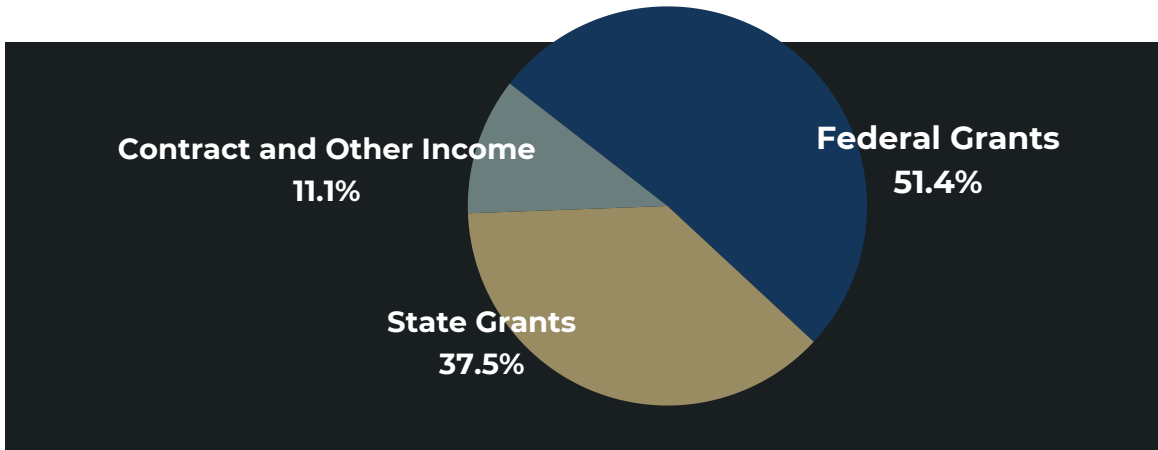
- Dawn West, Chief Court Administrator of the Third Circuit



**STATEMENT OF REVENUES**

**DOLLARS RECEIVED (IN 000s)**

Federal Grants	\$4,174
State Grants	\$3,045
Contract and Other Income	\$897
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$8,117</b>



**STATEMENT AND EXPENDITURES**

**DOLLARS SPENT (IN 000s)**

Salaries & Benefits - Attorneys and Paralegals	\$5,213
Salaries & Benefits - Management and General	\$1,496
<b>Total Salaries and Benefits</b>	<b>\$6,709</b>
Other Expenses	\$1,208

**BALANCE SHEET 6/30/2022 (IN 000s)**

ASSETS	\$5,483
LIABILITIES	\$885
NET ASSETS	
Without Donor Restrictions	\$4,081
With Donor Restrictions	\$516
<b>Total Net Assets</b>	<b>\$5,483</b>



# OUR PURPOSE TO TRANSFORM LIVES AND COMMUNITIES



# TO COMFORT OUR KEIKI **MOTHER FIGHTS TO KEEP KIDS SAFE**

“

*I want to make sure my kids are safe and I want what is best for them. I am really grateful for Legal Aid's help. Now, I feel empowered. I am not defeated anymore. - Isabella*



Isabella had been divorced from her husband when she reached out to Legal Aid in May 2022. It was a very difficult marriage, with domestic violence.

In one instance, she had broken knees and was unable to work. For a year, her eldest had been too traumatized to speak because of the abuse.

Isabella realized that she could no longer stay on O'ahu after the divorce. The cost of living was high, and her daughters needed specialized therapy to recover.

"I was close to being homeless. I did not even have money to buy diapers for my kids," recalls Isabella.

Legal Aid helped Isabella modify the divorce decree so she could make independent decisions for her children, including relocating them to another state.

"A request to relocate is difficult for the court to grant," says Legal Aid Staff Attorney Jamie DeMello. "We had to give them a vision of what it would look like if she moved, which would be more access to opportunity for the kids, especially therapy."

In March 2023, with Legal Aid's assistance, Isabella, whose first language is not English, was able to successfully represent herself in court.

She is now working as a dental assistant in another state, where she and her daughters live close to her sister. She is excited and hopeful about her life and her children's future.

”

*At Legal Aid, we are not just addressing the client's legal issue. A lot of us are trying to find resources to help our clients address other needs that come up while we are working with them, such as rent and utility relief or food assistance programs. If we know of a resource that can help, we provide it. I've seen everybody going above and beyond for their clients. That's how much we all care.*

- Legal Aid Staff Attorney Jamie DeMello

# TO PROTECT OUR KŪPUNA **SENIOR BECOMES PROACTIVE**



Mitsuyo, a professional artist, lives independently in an apartment complex for seniors in Kihei, Maui.

As she got older, it became more important to get her legal documents in order, including creating an advance health care directive and a will. This would provide peace of mind for both herself and her family members.

"I sought out assistance from Legal Aid because of my age," she says. "I felt like if I was to leave this earth I was not ready."

Mitsuyo knew that having these would ensure that her wishes were carried out, but she could not afford an attorney, so she contacted Legal Aid.

Legal Aid Paralegal Anna Alexander, Maui County, helped Mitsuyo process a power of attorney for her closest relative, a niece who lives on Oahu, an advance health care directive, and a will.

She listened to Mitsuyo's concerns. They discussed how to distribute her assets and specific instructions to be included in the documents.

*The service I received from Legal Aid is excellent! Anna is very caring and explains what I do not understand. I am so grateful for her assistance and for Legal Aid. - Mitsuyo*

"Mitsuyo is proactive, very healthy and has a strong mind. I assured her that it is a good thing to have this advance planning, so she can say what she wants," says Anna. "If we didn't help her, she would still be worried. She's happy she contacted Legal Aid."

Mitsuyo named her two nieces as the trustees of her properties and paintings.

Now, she is confident that everything has been organized and planned out. In the meantime, she continually keeps herself busy with art classes, senior activities, and painting.

*For elderly individuals, I think being proactive and doing their advance estate planning benefits them. I love helping our kūpuna. I've met a lot of people, and they appreciate the job that we do for them. That makes me feel good and makes me keep working hard to assist them.*

- Legal Aid Paralegal Anna Alexander

# TO EMPOWER OUR WAHINE **WIFE IS FREED FROM ABUSE**

— “ —  
*I was in a very abusive marriage. Legal Aid helped me get the divorce finished in a fast amount of time. Now, I can move forward with my life and keep my kids safe. - \*Elisa*

A victim of domestic violence and abuse, \*Elisa wanted to get divorced – fast. She was afraid that her husband would take their children if she waited to initiate divorce proceedings for too long. She also wanted to make sure she obtained full physical and legal custody of their two children.

Elisa’s husband had been abusive for the entire 13 years of their marriage, which included threats to harm, and even kill, members of her family. One day – thankfully – he left.

Elisa had been on her own in Kona trying to make ends meet since then. She reached out to Legal Aid to get the divorce papers started before he could file elsewhere.

Legal Aid staff attorneys prepared all legal documents, gave Elisa counsel and advice, and encouraged her to press on despite continued harassment from her husband through text messages.



In February 2023, the court granted Elisa her divorce decree and awarded her full custody of the children, child support, and a structured supervised visitation plan that ensures her children will be safe.

“The domestic violence was quite extensive; Elisa was very relieved that she’s free of him,” says Legal Aid Senior Staff Attorney Jessica ‘Jaycee’ Uchida.

“I’m really happy for her that she can move on forward with her life and that she can keep her children and herself safe.”

(\*not client’s given name)

— “ —  
*We are lucky to be part of not only Elisa’s journey, but the journeys of all individuals we assist who are escaping from relationships with intimate partner violence. Their journey is a story of freedom and healing, and what we do at Legal Aid is just one piece of addressing the trauma they have experienced.*

- Legal Aid Senior Staff Attorney Jessica ‘Jaycee’ Uchida

# TO SUPPORT OUR KĀNE **HUSBAND FINDS CLOSURE**



— “ —  
*Legal Aid helped me to sleep better at night. They were a very big help. I could never get my divorce if it wasn't for the help from Legal Aid. - Frank*

After 15 years of separation, Frank finally got his closure – the divorce papers that legally terminated his 25-year marriage.

His wife had left him in their Mountain View home on Hawai'i Island and moved to Kona. She took their four children with her.

Until he connected with Legal Aid, Frank wasn't sure the divorce would ever happen. We opened his case in March 2022 and closed in September.

“He was pretty high strung and stressed when he first came to us because this has been going on for a long time,” says Haunani Magalianes, Paralegal, Hawai'i Island Office. “But when I talked to him after the case was closed, he was low key, and seems happy and very thankful.”

It was an uncontested divorce, with no hearing. His estranged wife quickly signed the divorce decree.

Finally, the weight of uncertainty was lifted off of Frank's shoulders.

Though his income is very minimal, he can now send financial support to one child who is still under 18. (He was unable to send child support before because he did not know their address.) His life is also now more stable.

Access to legal services is extremely limited on Hawai'i Island (and other neighbor islands) making it difficult for many elderly and low-income individuals get a divorce decree, says Haunani.

— “ —  
*Legal Aid is very vital in every community. We don't have attorneys here on Hawai'i Island to represent people with no financial means. Some start their cases but there is no closure. So, when we can come in and help our seniors, it is a good feeling.*

- Legal Aid Paralegal Haunani Magalianes

# TO FIGHT FOR THE NON-RESIDENT **IMMIGRANT FEELS MORE STABLE**



— “ —

*Legal Aid helped me from the beginning to renew my green card. They are professional people who can help you without any cost to you, and you can trust them. - \*Natsuko*

\*Natsuko, a Japanese national, has carried a permanent resident visa (green card) since living in Hawai'i for a long time with her American husband. She stayed at home while her husband worked in the military. They did not have any children.

When Natsuko's green card expired, she became anxious and scared. She was afraid that immigration authorities would show up at her doors and send her back to Japan. Her deportation worries were further exacerbated when she lost the card.

"Natsuko thought her resident status expired because her card was expired," explains Staff Attorney Makoto Messersmith of Hawai'i Immigrant Center for Justice (HIJC) at Legal Aid.

"That is not true. The expiration is only for the card, and she is still a permanent resident."

Her husband sought Legal Aid's help on her behalf because Natsuko was not confident initiating the conversation in English. Nothing came out of the case, however. He did not follow up, their housing situation was unstable, and they couldn't afford to pay the renewal fees.

After Makoto wrote a letter to Natsuko in Japanese explaining the process, Natsuko called right away. In June 2022, she received her new green card. (When she lost it again, we helped her again in May 2023.)

Natsuko can now apply for a job or public benefits if she wants. Most importantly, she has peace of mind and is assured of her legal status as a resident.

(\*not client's given name)

— “ —

*It is challenging when clients have limited English proficiency but as an attorney, I have an obligation to talk to the person who needs my help. I'm glad we made an effort to reach out and talk to Natsuko.*

- Legal Aid Staff Attorney Makoto Messersmith,  
Hawai'i Immigrant Justice Center (HIJC) at Legal Aid

# TO DEFEND THE MARGINALIZED ***NATIVE HAWAIIAN KEPT FROM EVICTION***

— “ —

*Legal Aid is a miracle - they helped me live and not get evicted. I think that they're awesome. They're very helpful. They work really hard. - \*Gabby*



\*Gabby, a part-Hawaiian single woman, was peacefully renting out an apartment when she received a notice informing her of late fees of \$2,000 (said to be accumulated over two years).

This had her confused - she always paid on time and the housing voucher from the Honolulu City and County's Section 8 program was always early.

"I started to cry. I was panicking," Gabby recalls.

If she didn't pay the "late fees," she feared she would be houseless again and go back to living on the beaches of Waianae.

Gabby contacted the property manager's office for an explanation while looking for financial assistance, but nothing came out of it until she reached out to Legal Aid in December 2022.

Legal Aid Managing Attorney Russ Awakuni served as Gabby's primary advocate, speaking on her behalf with the property management office's resident manager and supervisor.

"We learned that the accounting department did not have the Notice of HAP (Housing Assistance Payment) contract in their files, so they held the checks and did not apply the monies to Gabby's account," says Russ. "Once they received a copy of the Notice, the issue was resolved and she was happy and relieved."

Gabby's "late fees" were cancelled and she was able to stay in her apartment. She felt relieved and validated.

Most of all, she is no longer worried about getting evicted and going back to the beach as a houseless person.

"I'm very happy. I would recommend Legal Aid to anybody who needs legal help," says Gabby.

(\*not client's given name)

— “ —

*I credit Gabby for taking the initiative to ask for help when she did not get answers timely. We learned that the property management simply did not have all of the necessary information and that they were not engaging in any improper discriminatory behavior based on her race, sex, or other protected class.*

- Legal Aid Managing Attorney Russ Awakuni





## Need Affordable Health Insurance

Insurance in takto edik wonen? | En mi mochen nēnēü medical insurance mei mokukun? | Kom e



LEGAL AID  
SOCIETY OF HAWAII

# DONOR HIGHLIGHTS



# LEGAL AID IN THE COMMUNITY

## THOUGHTS FROM SUPPORTERS

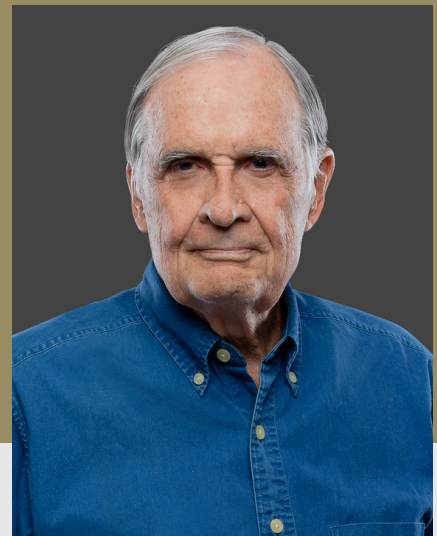
Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i is proud to recognize the exceptional commitment of its donors to the mission of making justice more accessible to Hawai'i residents. Their generosity not only promotes fairness in the legal system, but also reinforces the principle that everyone, regardless of financial means, deserves access to legal assistance. We thank them for their partnership and for being a catalyst for change.

### Why support Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i?

As lawyers, we make an oath to consider the legal needs of those without access to justice. The Legal Aid Society does a phenomenal job of connecting lawyers to people that need help, including through its Access to Justice Room (ATJR), which allows attorneys to provide pro bono services to members of the community. Cades Schutte has staffed the ATJR for a month per year since the program's inception over ten years ago. We are proud to support an organization that does so much in our community.

### Why is Legal Aid important in the community?

Legal Aid is important because it ensures access to justice, even for those who may not have the financial means to afford legal representation or navigate the legal system on their own. Although legal representation is something that every person should have a right to, the unfortunate truth is that a large population of individuals in our state cannot afford it. Especially in a community such as our own, which is made up of people from so many different cultures and backgrounds, Legal Aid is necessary to ensure that all are treated equally, and we should continue to strive to give that support to those that need it.



**E. Gunner Schull, Senior Counsel of Cades Schutte LLP and Director of the Cades Foundation**

**From Jake Rosenbery,  
Worker in the  
Hospitality Industry**

*"My wife, Jenny Biechele, and I support Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i because everyone in our community deserves access to legal services and our community is better when everyone has access to legal services."*



**Calvin Pang,  
Faculty,  
William S.  
Richardson  
School of Law**

### **Why support Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i?**

We cannot stop trying to achieve the ideal of "Equal Justice for All." As a former law student clerk, attorney, and board member and president at Legal Aid, I understand that every step forward keeps the ideal alive another day. I appreciate the hard work and commitment of every Legal Aid professional, who bravely and expertly responds to a human need that never goes away.

### **Why is Legal Aid important in the community?**

Legal Aid is important in so many ways, but three stand out to me. The first is the positive difference it makes in the lives of its clients. The second is its symbolic value to the community - its presence alone resists the notion that justice is only for those who can afford it. Finally, it has been the leader in making legal assistance more accessible to all. As the largest civil legal service provider in the state, it can do no less. We need its voice, its vision, its values.

### **From Scott G., in-house attorney for a national real estate organization**

#### **Why support Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i?**

Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i fulfills a critical role in providing legal services to people who would otherwise go without these services at a time when they need it most. It helps people access basic human needs such as health care, housing, government benefits, employment, and protection from domestic violence.

#### **Why is Legal Aid important in the community?**

By providing more access to legal services for those who might not otherwise be able to afford it, Legal Aid helps promote trust in the legal system. The community as a whole is improved when fewer people are homeless, more children are in school, and sick people are able to get health care.



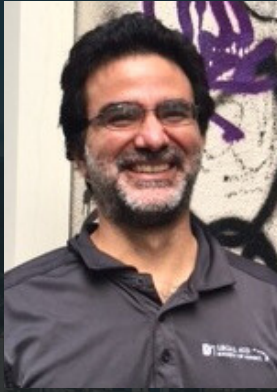
# LEGAL AID STAFF 100+ AND GOING STRONG





# OUR MISSION TO BUILD A JUST SOCIETY, ONE PERSON AT A TIME





# OUR COMMITMENT TO MAKE JUSTICE MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL





# MAHALO NUI LOA WE ARE GRATEFUL



JULY 1, 2022 – JUNE 30, 2023

# BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Our Board of Directors' unwavering commitment to justice and access to legal resources has made an impact on the lives of countless Hawai'i residents. Their strategic guidance, tireless efforts and dedication continue to advance Legal Aid's mission. We are grateful for their leadership and support. Their contributions have ensured that justice is not just a concept but a tangible reality for those who need it most.

## LEADERSHIP

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**Regan Iwao, Esq., *Vice-President***

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Community Director



JULY 1, 2022 – JUNE 30, 2023

# LEGAL AID SUPPORTERS

Receiving financial support from law firms, organizations and foundations is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of Legal Aid's services to the Hawai'i community. These funds provide the resources to ensure that individuals who may be unable to afford legal help have access to justice. We are honored to be chosen as their partner in creating change in the State of Hawai'i.

## LAW FIRMS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Aditi Fund c/o Hawai'i Community Foundation  
American Immigration Lawyers Association, Hawai'i Chapter  
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Cades Schutte - The Cades Foundation  
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Hawaiian Electric Industries  
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Kuakini Health System  
Lauren Briskin Charitable Fund  
Law Office of Kimberly A. Van Horn, LLLC  
Law Office of Ted H. S. Hong, AAL, LLLC  
Nakashima Ching LLC  
Outrigger Hospitality Group  
Padosi Foundation  
Pepsico Foundation  
Taketa 'Ohana Fund c/o Hawai'i Community Foundation  
The Fish Family c/o The Boston Foundation  
Watanabe Ing LLP Community Fund  
Yamamoto & Caliboso

JULY 1, 2022 – JUNE 30, 2023

# LEGAL AID SUPPORTERS

Thank you to the many individuals who are committed to Legal Aid's mission of building a just society, one person at a time. Their pro-active support empowers us to continue providing vital services and support to low-income groups and communities. We appreciate their kindness, compassion and generosity.

## INDIVIDUALS

Ashley K. L. Agcaoili  
Sergio Alcubilla  
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Tara Allgood  
Mabel and Joseph Andrews  
Esther K. Arinaga  
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Mary Cutler  
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Legal Aid's *pro bono* lawyers are a beacon of hope to the Hawai'i community with their selfless dedication to volunteer service. We are grateful to all 175 attorneys who give their time and expertise to those who cannot afford legal assistance through our Self-Help Centers in Maui County, Hawai'i County and Kaua'i, and the Honolulu Access to Justice Room. We are proud to serve with them, as they exemplify the true spirit of justice and compassion.

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