

Pro Bono End of 2024 Recap:

Brooklyn Defender Services Pro Bono unit is celebrating a wonderful year of successful and impactful pro bono partnerships. In 2024, we partnered with 22 firms and were able to leverage resources and expertise back to our clients to secure the best possible case outcomes. We are extraordinarily grateful to all our partners and are excited to share some highlights from Fall and Winter!

State Central Registry Advocacy

In October 2024, BDS partnered with Davis Wright Tremaine to assist parents and caregivers who have been directly impacted by the family regulation system. Davis Wright's volunteers underwent comprehensive training by BDS staff on how to best assist our clients through their family court cases and were educated on the harmful effects of system involvement for parents, caregivers, and children. Davis Wright's volunteers successfully assisted seven BDS clients in their efforts to clear their names from New York's Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR).

The SCR is a statewide database of reports of possible or suspected child abuse or neglect. However, a significant majority of these reports' mis-categorize poverty as "neglect" and do not involve allegations of abuse. These reports can also be made anonymously, meaning anyone can call in a report without any evidence of said neglect or abuse. Reports of such "neglect" to the SCR create a cruel cycle of system involvement for parents, caregivers, and children.

In these cases, a report to the SCR can stem from a family's lack of resources, and those reports then limit a parent or caregiver's ability to obtain or maintain employment, which only further restricts their ability to provide for their family, thus perpetuating cycles of poverty and system involvement. Amending/removing a parent's name from the SCR increases their ability to obtain meaningful employment and greater economic opportunities, which in turn allows them the chance to provide for their family and break the cycle.

Davis Wright's efforts to support parents and caregivers are much appreciated, and we look forward to future collaborations!

Immigration Unit

In November 2024, BDS welcomed Stephanie Lim, a pro bono fellow from Sidley Austin. Stephanie joined our Immigrant Community Action Project (ICAP) team and worked closely with ICAP staff to assist over ten clients with their Employment Authorization Document (EAD) applications and renewals. EAD's, commonly known as "work permits", grant immigrants the legal right to obtain employment in the US. The ability to legally work in a safe and fair workplace is vital for immigrant New Yorkers to access meaningful economic opportunities that empower them to acquire further resources to ensure their sustained success in the US.

In December 2024, Simpson Thacher & Barlett LLP assisted five BDS clients with their EAD applications and renewals. Supporting access to EAD's and the subsequent right to legal employment is imperative to protect immigrants from wage theft, workplace harassment, and other exploitative working environments that many immigrants are often subjected to.

We appreciate Stephanie's hard work during her fellowship and are incredibly grateful for Simpson Thacher's volunteers.

Law firms have provided many other valuable contributions to our immigration practices. Gibson Dunn has been an important advocate for our non-citizen clients, co-counseling a complex appeal to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA). This appeal started in January 2024, and is expected to go into 2025, and we are so thankful for Gibson's lasting commitment to this case and client.

Perkins Coie filed an amicus brief in support of BDS' client with intellectual disabilities who was in removal proceedings. The BIA had not taken considerable measures to accommodate and consider our client's disability during their removal, and this brief provided valuable legal arguments as to why the BIA should reconsider.

Research to Support our Litigation and Other Efforts

In addition to their EAD work in December 2024, Simpson Thacher & Barlett LLP has been a valuable partner to BDS throughout all of 2024. Their dedicated volunteers have completed over 16 country conditions reports for BDS' New York Immigrant Family Unity Project ("NYIFUP") and Immigrant Community Action Project ("ICAP"). People seeking asylum, withholding of removal, and Convention Against Torture (CAT) protections are required to demonstrate that they have an objective and reasonable fear of persecution or harm if they are returned to their country of origin through a document known as a "country conditions report." These reports are crucial in safeguarding our clients' security and longevity in the US. We are thankful for Simpson Thacher volunteers for their time and effort in compiling these reports.

Millbank has been working diligently to produce two legal research memos that will be vital in supporting BDS' Criminal Defense Practice.

Davis Polk partnered with BDS' Civil Rights & Law Reform team to conduct important research on jail conditions and programming that will support BDS' advocacy work.

Family Defense Cases and Impact Work

Several law firms have taken on pro bono cases in our Family Defense Practice, including co-counseling on difficult and complex legal issues and trials. Davis Polk has been an extraordinary partner in these efforts and has been co-counseling in a case where we have sought leave before the Court of Appeals. Additionally, Paul Weiss has worked diligently on the issue of 4th Amendment rights in the family regulation system and to support parents' rights during intrusive ACS investigations. We also partner with many firms on filing motions to vacate family court findings, and are grateful for Skadden, Arnold & Porter, and Crowell & Moring's commitment to this work, filing a combined nine motions to vacate on behalf of BDS clients. These motions are incredibly important for our clients, as it allows them to move forward from their family court cases in a meaningful and significant way, without having to carry the stigma of a family court finding on their record.

These are just some of the many accomplishments we have achieved through pro bono partnerships this year. We are grateful to the offices we partnered with this year and look forward to continuing this important work together in 2025. There are many opportunities to collaborate with our staff on pro bono projects ranging from short-term research assignments to complex litigation. We rely on these partnerships to advance the mission of Brooklyn Defender Services and to provide our clients with the best possible representation. If you or your firm is interested in partnering with Brooklyn Defenders Pro Bono Unit, please contact Molly Meltzer, Director of Pro Bono, at MMeltzer@bds.org.

