

A photograph of four young women with diverse backgrounds and abilities, smiling and posing together outdoors. The woman on the far left has curly blonde hair and is wearing a bright blue sweater. The woman next to her has long dark hair and is wearing a white sweater. The woman next to her has short dark hair and is wearing a dark blue jacket, with her hands clasped near her face. The woman on the far right has dark hair with bangs and is wearing a colorful patterned sweater. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

WE RISE

2020 **ANNUAL REPORT**

2020 DRO STATISTICS:

DRO PERFORMED

investigations and monitoring
activities at

93 LOCATIONS

with a hybrid of remote monitoring
and in-person visits.

DRO SUBMITTED

administrative comments, testimony,
and advocacy letters to impact

25 PIECES OF LEGISLATION

DRO FIELDED

6,839

requests for assistance
while working primarily
from home.

DRO PROVIDED

training & support at

89 VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

DRO RESPONDED

to assistance requests in

88 OF OHIO'S 88 COUNTIES



2020 was a year of challenges and changes, of setbacks and victories, of growth and evolution.

Amid a global crisis that exponentially magnified the issues faced by Ohioans with disabilities, our work was needed more than perhaps ever before. Complicated by the rapid shift to a work-from-home environment for our entire team, these results were only made possible by the dedication of our staff, the steady hand of our leadership, the commitment of our board members, and the unwavering partnership of our allies and supporters.

The totality of our work couldn't possibly be contained within an essay, booklet, or graphic, but we firmly believe these victories are a testament to our commitment to the mission and the tenaciousness of our advocacy.



"Our advocacy efforts over the course of this pandemic have helped tackle biases within our healthcare system against people with disabilities."

SUZANNE MUSLEH,
DRO ATTORNEY TEAM LEAD

COVID-19 IMPACTS

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Disability Rights Ohio (DRO) team members quickly found themselves rethinking and reshaping every aspect of their work.

As people with disabilities were being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, DRO's new processes and procedures ensured that calls were answered, and needs were met all across our state.

Our Intake and Operations teams partnered to ensure DRO's services remained accessible to our community as we moved to primarily working from home. Both by telephone and enhanced web-based intake submissions, DRO fielded 6,839 calls for assistance last year. With the ever-changing restrictions, policies, and guidelines surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, our Intake Specialists helped clients understand resources available to them in the areas of housing, provision of community-based services, transportation, medical care, employment, voting, and many more.

As the prospect of care rationing arose from a medical system overwhelmed by COVID-19, our team worked to protect access to medical care and services for Ohioans with disabilities. By working with allied organizations and the Ohio Department of Health, we helped to create guidelines to prevent care from being withheld based on one's disability.

As vaccines became available, our advocacy was pivotal in ensuring people whose disabilities put them at higher risk of COVID-19 were prioritized in the phased distribution.

Monitoring of facilities, which is part of our core responsibilities, became more difficult as facilities went under COVID lockdown. By rapidly creating procedures and tools to complete monitoring and investigate facilities remotely, our Abuse and Neglect team set new standards for their work. Despite the pandemic, these innovative processes led to more monitoring activities being completed than in previous years.

With the extended closure or remote-only learning environments of schools throughout Ohio, our Special Education team compiled special resources and FAQ guides to help families make sense of complex issues like Compensatory Education and Extended School Year services. They also quickly adapted to complete IEP meetings virtually, ensuring parents and students understand their rights during an incredibly trying time.



EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES TO LIVE, WORK, AND GO WHERE THEY CHOOSE

Ensuring that people with disabilities have the opportunity to integrate into their communities has always been a top priority for DRO.

Ensuring that people with disabilities have the opportunity to integrate into their communities has always been a top priority for DRO. Because of the pandemic, it was even more crucial that we empower people with disabilities to live, work, and go where they choose. Last September, we helped form the Ohio Home and Community-Based Services Coalition – a group dedicated to protecting and expanding home community based services (HCBS) in Ohio. Over 110 members strong, the Coalition is comprised of providers and advocates that work directly with legislators to increase funding and supports for Ohio's HCBS system.

As we work to build power in our communities, we also are working to address systemic issues through litigation. Five years ago, we began the Ball v. DeWine class-action lawsuit, advocating for increased opportunities for community transitions for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities living in facilities. When the case was settled last year, the state agreed to fund hundreds of waivers that allow Ohioans to transition from institutional settings to living in their communities. By beginning our own virtual outreach efforts, we were able to educate and empower people living in Intermediate Care Facilities to have meaningful choice in their care.

Much like the disruption to healthcare and community, COVID-19 also seriously impacted employment for people with disabilities. As companies shifted to respond to the pandemic, DRO helped people with disabilities advocate for the accommodations they needed, ensuring healthy, sustainable employment. Our team advocated for individuals facing new barriers or discrimination while also creating more general COVID-19 employment resources.



BUILDING A SOCIETY WHERE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE FREE OF ABUSE, NEGLECT, AND EXPLOITATION

At DRO, one of our top priorities is monitoring and investigating abuse, neglect, and exploitation: we knew this work couldn't pause during the pandemic.

Over the last year, DRO's Abuse and Neglect, VOCA, and Representative Payee Review teams cross-collaborated to address individual and systemic issues through an intersectional lens.

Our Abuse and Neglect Team created innovative ways to conduct virtual monitoring at more than 125 facilities, which lead to active investigations at facilities that required further attention. Over the summer, we published a comprehensive report of our investigation into Sequel Pomegranate Systems, a youth Residential Treatment Facility (RTF). Through our report and investigation, we encouraged the state to take action surrounding the systemic abuse and neglect that children with disabilities faced while at the facility. Ultimately, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services suspended the facility's license to operate their RTF—an action that potentially protected countless children from abuse and neglect.

DRO staff also worked diligently to address systemic issues within jails and prisons. A 20-month investigation into the Cuyahoga County Corrections Center demonstrated long-standing failures within Ohio's prisons and jails. After hundreds of interviews with inmates and countless hours analyzing data, we published a report that educated policymakers on the serious needs in that facility.

DRO's Representative Payee Review team worked closely with our Abuse and Neglect team to prevent and detect exploitation of Social Security beneficiaries. Advocates helped individuals understand their rights as well as assessed any indications of abuse during their reviews. COVID-19 brought more questions than answers for many beneficiaries, so reviewers took this into account when educating clients about stimulus payments, benefit changes, and more. Working hand in hand across teams & communities, DRO's reviewers ensured comprehensive support, protection, and education for both beneficiaries and payees.

“Without DRO’s advocacy, I don’t believe successful outcomes would have been reached for these clients.”

SARAH HILL,
VICTIMS’ RIGHTS ATTORNEY

In addition to prevention and education, DRO also works on the opposite end of the spectrum—addressing injustice and paths forward following a crime. Through our Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant, we work to ensure that victims of crime with disabilities have the same opportunities to tell their story as people without disabilities—often through rights education, accessibility advocacy, and client empowerment. Last year, the VOCA team brought justice to several long-term clients and demonstrated the importance of advocacy and empowerment at all levels of the justice system.

Moving into 2021 and beyond, DRO stands ready to identify, investigate, and advocate where people with disabilities may face abuse, neglect, or exploitation.



"Systemic racism and ableism are inextricably linked. We cannot solve one without solving the other. Listening to and centering the perspectives of those with lived experience is the most effective way to achieving disability justice and racial justice."

KEVIN TRUITT,
DRO LEGAL ADVOCACY DIRECTOR

CONFRONTING DISCRIMINATION WHERE RACE AND DISABILITY INTERSECT

Last year's systemic injustices solidified that anti-racist intersectionality must be centered in all aspects of our work.

As we work to address these inequities and injustices for people with disabilities, we must consider that these same systems have worked to oppress Black communities, Indigenous communities, and all communities of color for centuries. Working together at these systemic crossroads is crucial for building a world that is accessible and safe for all people.

In our report, “Policing and Racial Injustice: A Disability Rights Perspective: Impacts and Solutions,” we demonstrated the clear connection between race, disability, and police use of force.

The evidence was clear: BIPOC people with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to be injured, killed, or arrested by police. The report helped build a robust framework on police divestment and community reinvestment in Ohio, ultimately leading to the report's submission to the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights.

The scope of this fight ranged from the international to local level, when we sent a letter to the Columbus City Council outlining alternatives to policing in the context of mental health crises. Our comprehensive research found that even officers trained in crisis intervention don't prevent negative and violent interactions between BIPOC people with disabilities and the police and harmful outcomes like arrest, incarceration, or involuntary hospitalization too often follow. Instead, we recommended that a non-violent, non-policing intervention system with trained professionals should be used when interacting with people in crisis—aiming to save countless lives with needed community supports.



"The damage the pandemic has caused to student achievement has been profound, and data is being collected on the consequences. We will use that data to inform our next steps, and how and where to advocate for increased services and supports for students with disabilities."

KRISTIN HILDEBRANT,
DRO SENIOR ATTORNEY

ENSURING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES RECEIVE THE FREE AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED

The law requires a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities.

Our Special Education team and Special Education Fellow program transitioned seamlessly to helping families at remote IEP meetings. As schools and services shut their doors, families turned to DRO to ensure their student's rights were protected and their needs were met. We quickly developed materials and guidance to help families properly address the challenges that come with remote schooling. By working with our partners and allies to host educational webinars, our advocacy information and resources were amplified to all corners of the state.

In the wake of the 2019 settlement of Doe v. State of Ohio, we continued to work with the Ohio Department of Education on a plan to improve integration and academic achievement of Ohio students with disabilities. The agreement enhances the State's support for special education throughout Ohio, as well as support for measurable improvements in student performance and inclusion for children with disabilities in 11 of Ohio's school districts.

"You have impacted this journey in a most profound way for our family, yet you have been so gentle and patient with me through this process. I can never thank you enough for not only giving me hope but helping me successfully get the education my children need and deserve."



ADVOCATING SO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE EQUAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

An equitable society can only be achieved when all voices are engaged and represented throughout the legislative process.

Despite the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked to ensure Ohioans were afforded equal opportunities to participate in elections. DRO also partnered with allied organizations to advance the understanding of assistive technology available to voters, such as Ohio's newly expanded remote ballot marking tool program.

“Leading up to the November 2020 general election, DRO staff did virtual visits to a number of settings to talk to people with disabilities and staff about voting rights, the different ways to cast a ballot, and how to utilize DRO as a resource for any questions or problems people may experience in registering to vote or casting a ballot before or on Election Day.”

KEVIN TRUITT,
DRO LEGAL ADVOCACY DIRECTOR

A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When I became Executive Director on March 1, 2020 - just before the COVID-19 pandemic upended our world - we were already working to increase the effectiveness of our advocacy for Ohioans with disabilities. By focusing on input from our communities about the issues they face, we strategically shaped our work and our priorities. This focused strategy quickly became the keystone that protected our work, our mission, and our communities as the world around us rapidly changed.

As COVID-19 reached our state, we understood the disproportionate way it would impact people with disabilities. Seeing the potential for rationing of care in our healthcare system, disruption of services for people who depend on them, and long-lasting problems caused by shuttered or online-only schools, our team worked tirelessly to address both new and lingering issues facing Ohioans with disabilities. The advocacy we performed, the resources we developed, and the new processes we created helped curb what could have been much more devastating impacts.

Perhaps most impressive, the DRO team was able to accomplish all of this in the face of a rapidly changing work environment themselves. Within days they were moved to primarily working from home, ensuring that our clients were heard, and our communities were served without missing a beat. Along the way, we helped form the Ohio Home and Community-Based Services Coalition to help advance support for and access to services outside of residential facilities. As Ohioans in facilities were much more likely to contract and die from COVID-19, this work became more urgent with each passing day.

To put it mildly, we were tested in 2020. At each turn, the steadfast work of our Disability Rights Ohio team bore out our mission and our vision. While I don't know what lies ahead in the coming days and months, the strategic, mission-focused resolve shown over this past year gives me the confidence that we're ready to face whatever comes our way. None of this would have been possible without our team, our board, our allies, and our supporters. To all those who had a hand in this work: Please know it wouldn't have happened without you.

Kerstin Sjoberg

“I’m overjoyed that the work of the employees at DRO have the ability to bring considerable change for people with disabilities.”

JORDY STRINGER,
DRO BOARD MEMBER

OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

An active and experienced board of eight founding members currently serve on the Disability Rights Ohio Board of Directors. Up to 15 members can sit on the Board, with the majority being people with disabilities or their family members representing geographic and cultural diversity. In wading through all the challenges that come along with leading a non-profit organization like ours, each board member’s unique story and background helps ensure that the core of our mission - advocating for the rights of Ohioans with disabilities - never slips from view. The following are the current board members of Disability Rights Ohio:

- Walt Asbury
- Bill Bauer, *Vice President*
- Jeffrey Folkerth
- Dawn Henslee
- Susan Koller, *Secretary*
- Jennilee Mohler, *President*
- Ron Patton
- Jeffrey Pollock
- Jordy Stringer
- Joseph Witalec, *Treasurer*
- TyKiah Wright

FINANCIALS

Disability Rights Ohio receives support from core federal grants that provide the basic foundation for our work as the protection and advocacy system. We also strategically partner with federal and state agencies, private foundations and individual donors to build long-term stability and provide additional programs and services that advance our mission.

“It’s a privilege to sit at the table with other advocates for Ohioans with disabilities and to have the opportunity to offer a voice to those our society has tried to silence.”

JENNI BARNHART MOHLER,
DRO BOARD OF DIRECTORS

EXPENSES:

PROTECTION/ADVOCACY &
CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

\$4,052,537

ADMINISTRATIVE & GENERAL

\$993,122

OTHER PROGRAMS

\$524,772

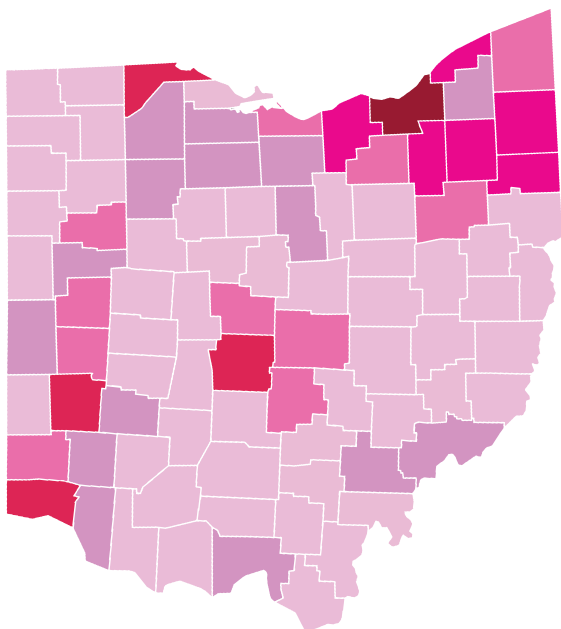
FUNDRAISING

\$31,610

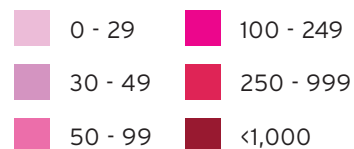
FY 2020

SOURCES OF FUNDS:

PADD	\$	1,191,618	21%
REP PAYEE		1,021,755	18%
PAIMI		970,551	17%
PAIR		589,096	11%
CAP		410,734	7%
WIPA		286,185	5%
PAVA		219,554	4%
PABSS		190,163	3%
PATBI		146,054	3%
PAAT		135,847	2%
VOCA		203,784	4%
OTHER		236,699	4%
		5,602,041	100%



CLIENT COUNT



DRO SERVED
6,289 CLIENTS
 IN FY 2020

CORE FEDERAL GRANTS

- Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities (PADD)
- Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI)
- Client Assistance Program (CAP)
- Protection and Advocacy for Individual Rights (PAIR)
- Protection and Advocacy for Assistive Technology (PAAT)
- Protection and Advocacy under the Help America Vote Act (PAVA)
- Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Traumatic Brain Injury (PATBI)
- Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS)
- Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Program (WIPA)
- Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries with Representative Payees (PABRP)

OTHER RESOURCES

- Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Fair Housing Program
- Ingram-White Castle Special Education Fellowship and The Columbus Foundation
- Victims of Crime Assistance Act Fund



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[disabilityrightsohio.org](https://www.disabilityrightsohio.org)



Disability Rights Ohio is authorized by federal law to protect the human, legal, and civil rights of people with disabilities in Ohio. DRO and this publication are made possible through funds received from federal programs. For a complete list of programs, visit: <https://www.disabilityrightsohio.org/programs>

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