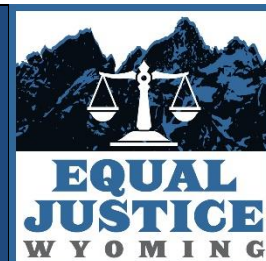


# Equal Justice Wyoming

## Annual Report to the Wyoming Supreme Court July 2019



*"If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment:*

*Thou shalt not ration justice."*

*- Learned Hand*

### Board of Commissioners

Stuart Day, President  
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Jacquelyn Bridgeman,  
Secretary-Treasurer  
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Ronda Munger  
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Leora Hoshall, VISTA Supervisor  
Marykaren Ripple, Staff Attorney/Pro  
Bono Coordinator  
Jessica Wales, Administrative Assistant  
Henry Wisdorf, Staff Attorney/IT Project  
Manager



### Message from the Executive Director

The past year has been particularly exciting for Equal Justice Wyoming. On behalf of the Board of Commissioners and Staff of Equal Justice Wyoming ("Equal Justice"), I am pleased to report on our progress over the 2019 fiscal year (FY) ending June 30, 2019.

One of the most exciting developments over the past year has been the expansion of our AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) program. Equal Justice expanded from having a single VISTA member serving at our office to becoming an Intermediary program. Becoming an Intermediary enabled us to expand and support VISTAs at multiple subsites. The goal of the VISTA program is to help build organizations' capacity. We currently have six VISTA members serving.

We also recognize that volunteers are an integral part of our program and essential to helping those who would

otherwise be unable to afford legal services. We expanded our use of non-attorney volunteers to help people navigate to trusted resources and legal help. These non-attorney volunteers, in addition to our volunteer attorneys, helped more people find assistance and answers to their legal questions. The LiveChat service on our website, the Volunteer Reference Attorney Program, and the Wyoming Free Legal Answers site, all utilizing volunteers, continue to grow and serve more people.

As always, we thank the dedicated volunteers, VISTA members, staff of legal aid programs, and all our pro bono attorneys who donated their valuable time over the past year. Thank you for your support.

**4,979 people received legal services and self-help assistance in FY 2019**

In FY 2019, 4,979 persons received assistance from Equal Justice and the programs we fund. We are pleased with the increased number of people served throughout the state, but the reality is that we are still unable to help many

people who qualify for services simply because we lack adequate resources to meet the need. In the upcoming years, we hope to close the justice gap.

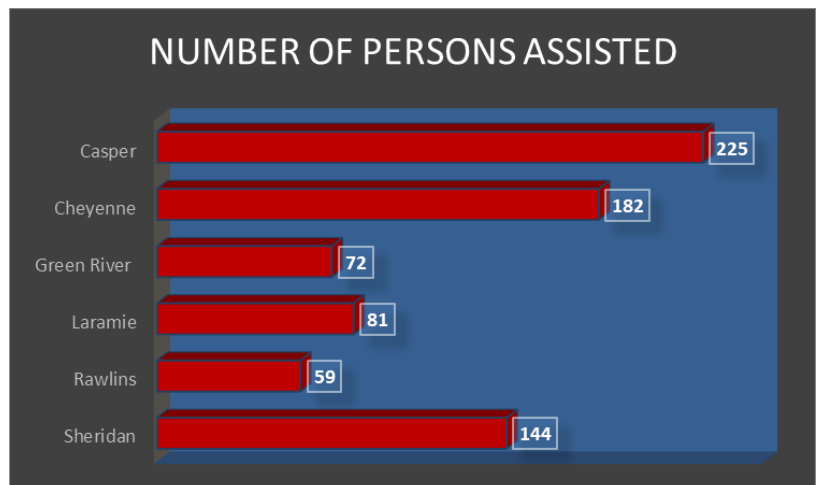
- Angie Dorsch

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## Pro Bono Programs and Initiatives

### Volunteer Reference Attorney Program

The Volunteer Reference Attorney (VRA) Program places attorneys in courthouses to provide legal information, explain court procedures, and assist litigants in completing pro se forms. It is difficult for self-represented litigants to understand the complex civil justice system, and the VRA helps people navigate often-confusing court processes and procedures. The program continues to be a success and has been welcomed by court staff, volunteer attorneys, and the public. A reference attorney is available in the courthouses of each of the six counties on the first and third Thursday of each month from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., except in Green River and Rawlins where an attorney is only available on the first



**763 individuals assisted by  
74 Volunteer Reference Attorneys**

Thursday of each month. Seventy-four Reference Attorneys assisted 763 individuals in 2019, a 12% increase from 2018.

## Wyoming Free Legal Answers

The Wyoming Free Legal Answers (WFLA) secure online portal, [wyoming.freelegalanswers.org](http://wyoming.freelegalanswers.org), was launched in August 2016, in partnership with the American Bar Association, to offer free legal advice online. The website screens applicants for income eligibility and allows eligible individuals to submit civil legal questions via a secure portal. Attorneys licensed to practice law in Wyoming can register as volunteers to answer questions on the site. Equal Justice provides the day-to-day administrative functions for the site, including ensuring that only Wyoming licensed attorneys in good standing are given access to answer questions. Equal Justice also sends weekly updates to the volunteer lawyers, including resources for both lawyers and clients.



**230 legal questions answered by  
17 volunteer attorneys  
29% increase in questions answered**

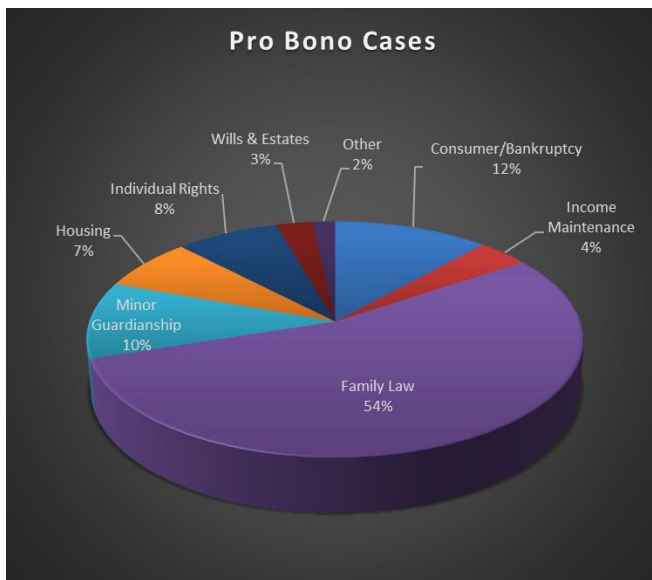
The portal is a valuable resource that reaches Wyomingites in rural and underserved areas of the state as well as those with limited access to transportation and child care. This innovative tool allows flexibility for busy attorneys to provide pro bono services when it is convenient for them. In FY 2019, pro bono attorneys answered 230 questions submitted on the portal, a 29% increase over last year.

## Volunteer Lawyers Program

Equal Justice manages the statewide Volunteer Lawyers Program (VLP) in partnership with the Wyoming State Bar. We strive to provide resources and support to encourage and make it easier for attorneys to deliver pro bono legal services to low-income clients. The type of assistance provided by volunteer attorneys ranges from advice and brief services to full-representation of clients. One opportunity for attorneys to volunteer is the free legal clinics sponsored by Equal Justice. Monthly clinics are held in Cheyenne and Laramie; additional clinics are held periodically in other parts of the state in collaboration with local bar associations, such as the Natrona and Sheridan County Bars.

The legal advice clinic in Laramie is held in collaboration with the University of Wyoming College of Law's Equal Justice Club and the Downtown Clinic, a safety-net healthcare provider. The clinic expands pro bono services, benefits the community, and offers a valuable learning opportunity for law students who volunteer.

Equal Justice is not able to connect every qualifying applicant with a volunteer attorney. The requests for assistance far outpace the number of available pro bono attorneys. However, 180 legal matters were handled by a volunteer attorney over the past year.



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*"[My attorney] was THE BEST. Very professional, kind and listened to and helped me tremendously. I couldn't have done it without her. Thank you!"*

*"I am so grateful for all the help that was given to me!"*

*"This program is wonderful, staff is great, professional, and caring. I can never THANK everyone enough. Equal Justice is truly a God send. Thanks to all from my heart."*

*"[My attorney] is the best. He got my home back."*

*— Feedback from clients who received legal assistance through the Volunteer Lawyer Program in 2019*

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**180 matters handled by pro bono attorneys**

The number of pro bono cases declined slightly in 2019. Although we do not know the exact reason for the decrease, it is likely that, as we have expanded other programs, such as the Volunteer Reference Attorney Program and the Wyoming Free Legal Answers website, some persons looking for legal help may be turning to our other resources for legal help. All other areas of our pro bono program have increased significantly.

## **Volunteer Attorney Receives Pro Bono Award from Wyoming State Bar**

Robin Sessions Cooley received the Wyoming State Bar's Pro Bono Award in September 2018 for her outstanding service through the Wyoming Free Legal Answers (WFLA) portal. Since the launch of WFLA, Robin has answered more than 200 questions, the most questions answered by a volunteer on the WFLA site. In addition, Robin has volunteered at several of our in-person legal advice clinics in Cheyenne. We are grateful for all that Robin has done to further access to legal services.

## **Two Wyoming Attorneys Recognized as Pro Bono Leaders by the American Bar Association**

Robin Sessions Cooley and Dona Playton both received recognition from the American Bar Association (ABA) as 2018 Pro Bono Leaders for their work on Wyoming Free Legal Answers (WFLA). The ABA recognized every attorney across the country who answered more than 50 questions in 2018 on the national Free Legal Answers site. Only 73 lawyers in the entire country received the award and we are proud that two of those volunteers are from Wyoming. Congratulations to Robin and Dona. We are thankful for their dedicated service.

### **Support for Volunteer Attorneys**

Equal Justice provides support to pro bono and legal aid attorneys in several ways. One of the resources we continually update and maintain is the Pro Bono Portal on our website. There are a variety of resources on the Portal, such as sample pleadings and toolkits. These resources are helpful for attorneys who take pro bono cases in areas of law they do not regularly handle.

Equal Justice also has a pool of volunteer mentor attorneys who are willing to mentor less experienced attorneys taking a pro bono case. Over the past year, we have updated our list of mentor attorneys, added new mentors, and added new resources to the Pro Bono Portal. We also are in the process of updating and adding to our Volunteer Reference Manual, which is a quick reference tool for attorneys to use at our legal clinics.

We also continue to provide professional liability insurance to cover our volunteers for any case or activity they undertake through our program.

## **Self-Help Resources and Legal Information**

### **Online Legal Information and Resources**

Equal Justice launched our legal information website, [www.equaljustice.wy.gov](http://www.equaljustice.wy.gov), in November 2012. Since then, we have continually expanded the site and updated the content to provide information, resources, videos, online classrooms, and pro se forms that address the most common civil legal issues faced by low-income individuals.

Over the past year we had to update the content management system for our site to increase functionality. We also updated and added new online classrooms, new areas of law, and new pro se forms. The size and scope of the website make its upkeep an ongoing task, but providing the information and resources is vitally important. We will continue to maintain and improve the site.

The website is an important tool that allows the public to understand their legal rights and access legal information in plain language.

We continue to see an increase in the utilization of our website. In FY 2019, we saw a 21.4% increase in the number of site visits from 2018. We also had an incredible increase in the number of people seeking assistance finding information and resources through our LiveChat feature on the website.



## LiveChat

Equal Justice strives to increase self-help services and to add Volunteer Reference Attorney locations where people can get help finding appropriate legal resources in person, but many individuals in Wyoming do not have access to in-person assistance. In order to help people find the information they need remotely, Equal Justice's website has a LiveChat feature that can help users navigate our expansive website to find the legal resources they need. The LiveChat is somewhat like a remote self-help center

**755 visitors to [www.legalhelp.wy.gov](http://www.legalhelp.wy.gov) received assistance from a trained LiveChat operator**  
**424% increase over 2018**

in that it does not provide legal advice, but instead helps guide people to appropriate information and trusted resources. In FY 2019, 755 visitors to the website received assistance from a trained LiveChat operator, which is a 424% increase from 2018. The majority of the LiveChat volunteers are law students; the system is also sometimes manned by undergraduate students. We

utilize an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) member to help provide training on the LiveChat software and to manage the volunteers' schedules.

## AmeriCorps VISTA Program

The increase in the LiveChat use is due in large part to the outreach and recruitment of a larger number of LiveChat volunteers. Marissa Carpio is the third VISTA member to serve with Equal Justice and she completed her year of service in July 2019. Marissa recruited and trained a large team of students, which led to more hours volunteered by trained LiveChat operators on the site.



We are excited that Marissa recently completed her year of AmeriCorps VISTA service. We are equally pleased that she has accepted the position as our first VISTA Leader and will be serving a second year with our program. As our VISTA Leader, Marissa will provide mentorship and support for the new VISTA members joining our team and will continue to help us expand the capacity of our program as we continue to grow. We are now an Intermediary program focused on justice-related issues, and we will have a total of eleven VISTA members serving with Equal Justice and our subsites within the next year.

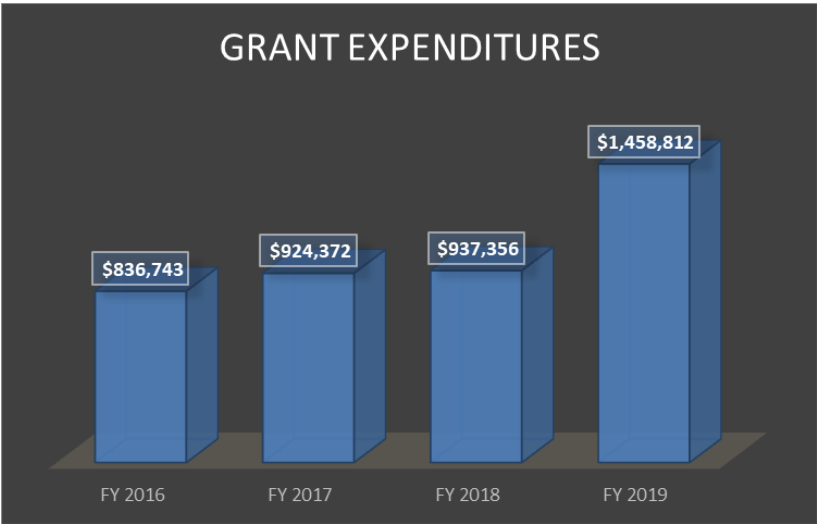
### Outreach and Public Awareness

The Equal Justice Staff engages in outreach to help people know their rights and to increase public awareness of available legal resources and programs. Staff and VISTA members held outreach events with social service providers and community partners, various organizations such as CLIMB Wyoming, Dads Making a Difference, Homeless Veterans Stand Down, the Wyoming Homeless Point-in-Time Count, and presentations at public libraries and senior centers across Wyoming.

Equal Justice conducts regular outreach at the VA Hospital in Cheyenne. Our AmeriCorps VISTA members staff a resource table at the VA hospital each month to provide legal information and resources to veterans. We assisted 102 veterans through our VA outreach last year. Equal Justice Staff also provided a training to VA Staff across the state to highlight available resources so they can make appropriate referrals when their patients could benefit from legal services. In addition to our outreach at the VA, we have also partnered with the Vet Center to assist veterans. We will continue to grow our outreach efforts.

**102 veterans assisted through VA outreach**

### Supporting Statewide Civil Legal Services through Grants



Equal Justice’s mission to provide a statewide delivery system for civil legal aid is largely carried out through our grants to legal service organizations. We are the largest single source of funding for civil legal services in Wyoming. In FY 2019, we provided a total of \$1,458,812 in grants.

**\$1,458,812 provided in grants  
2,949 clients received services**

Equal Justice received \$300,000 of VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) and \$100,000 of Surcharge funds from the Division of Victim Services to increase civil legal services to victims of crime. We granted the funds to the Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault to increase legal assistance to victims.

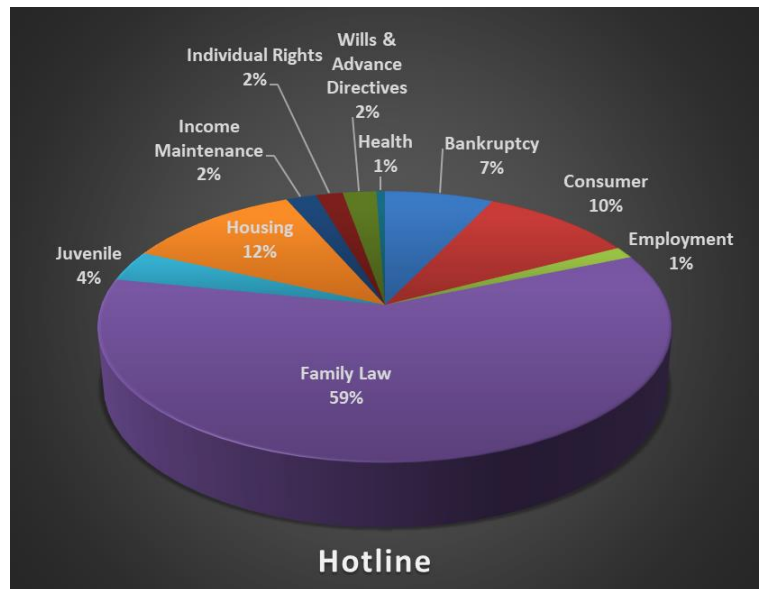
In total, 2,949 eligible clients received legal services through the grant programs we fund and administer.

## Legal Aid of Wyoming

Legal Aid of Wyoming is a statewide legal service provider. Equal Justice awarded three grants to Legal Aid of Wyoming to provide legal services in underserved areas of the state.

### Statewide Legal Advice and Intake Hotline Grant

Equal Justice has partnered with Legal Aid of Wyoming to ensure individuals across the state have access to the advice of a lawyer through a hotline, which has been in operation since November 2012. Legal Aid of Wyoming operates the hotline Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The hotline is a lifeline for many people in rural areas with limited access to a legal aid office. The hotline number is widely distributed by court clerks and librarians to people who are looking for legal advice and assistance.



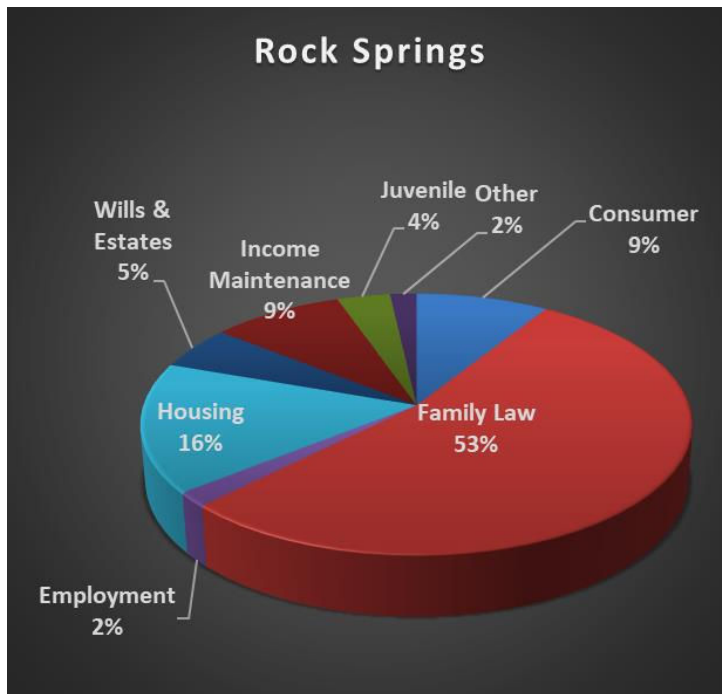
**2,310 callers received legal help over the hotline**

The hotline is an effective and efficient way to provide legal advice and process applications for people across the entire state, including rural and underserved areas. Clients are screened for eligibility before any advice or services are provided, and an application is then taken. The hotline assists people from every county in Wyoming.

The hotline had experienced a significant decline in calls in 2018. In contrast, the hotline provided services to 2,310 callers in 2019, a 46% increase from 2018. We are pleased to see the number of callers bounce back after last year's decrease. This indicates the hotline continues to provide a valuable service throughout the state.



## Rock Springs (Southwest Wyoming) Grant

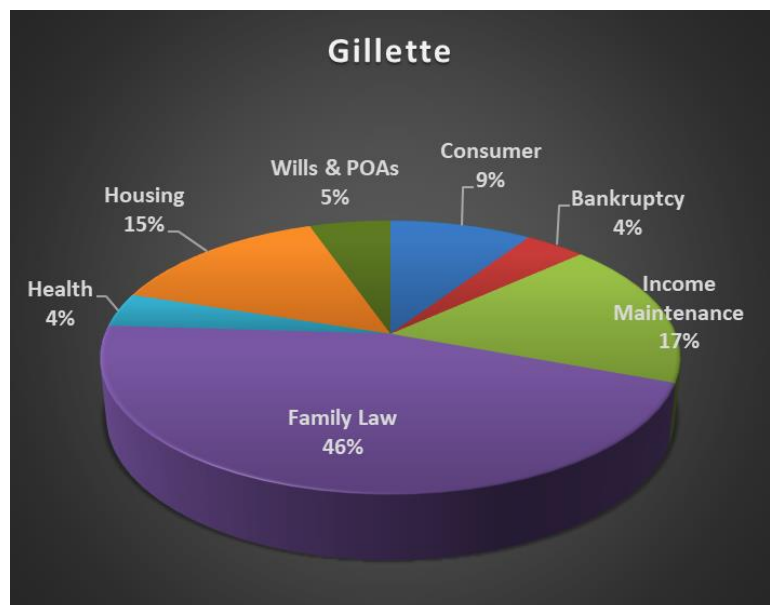


In June 2013, Equal Justice partnered with Legal Aid of Wyoming, awarding a grant specifically to expand services to the southwest corner of Wyoming by opening a legal aid office in that area of the state for the first time. Since the launch of the program, Equal Justice has continued to provide the necessary funds to maintain a full-time attorney in Rock Springs to serve Sweetwater, Lincoln, and Uinta Counties. The grant from Equal Justice has made it possible to expand services to this underserved area of the state. In 2019, the Rock Springs attorney handled 56 legal matters.

**56 legal matters handled in 2019**

## Gillette (Northeast Wyoming) Grant

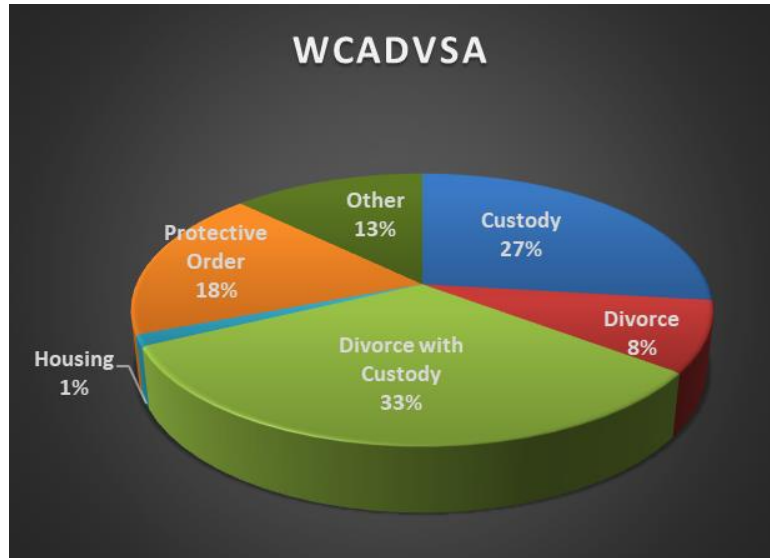
The northeast corner of Wyoming had never had a legal aid office until September 2013, when a grant from Equal Justice provided the funding for a full-time legal aid attorney in Gillette for the first time. Equal Justice has continued to provide the funding to maintain a legal aid office in Gillette. The attorney provides services to a large service area covering five counties. The attorney provides legal services in Campbell, Crook, Johnson, Sheridan, and Weston Counties. The Gillette attorney handled 75 cases in 2019.



**75 legal matters handled in 2019**

## Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

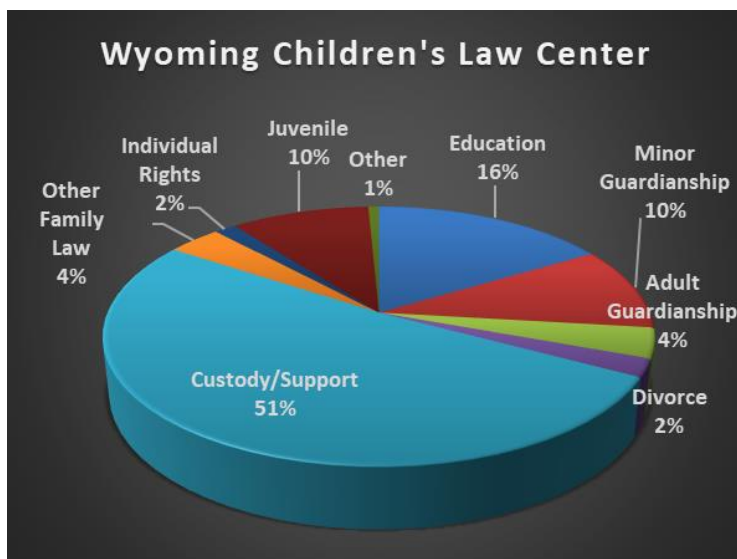
The Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (“the Coalition”) is a statewide legal aid provider serving victims of abuse and other crimes. The services the Coalition provides are vital to protect victims from further harm. Their services go beyond getting protective orders. The Coalition provides holistic services to help victims with all issues related to abuse, for example representing victims seeking divorce or custody.



**227 cases handled in 2019**

Equal Justice has provided substantial funding to support the work of the Coalition since 2012. The funds have expanded the availability of legal services and support a satellite office in Cody that was opened in 2016. Through additional awards from Equal Justice, the Coalition has also opened new offices in Lander and Casper. The Coalition handled 227 cases in 2019.

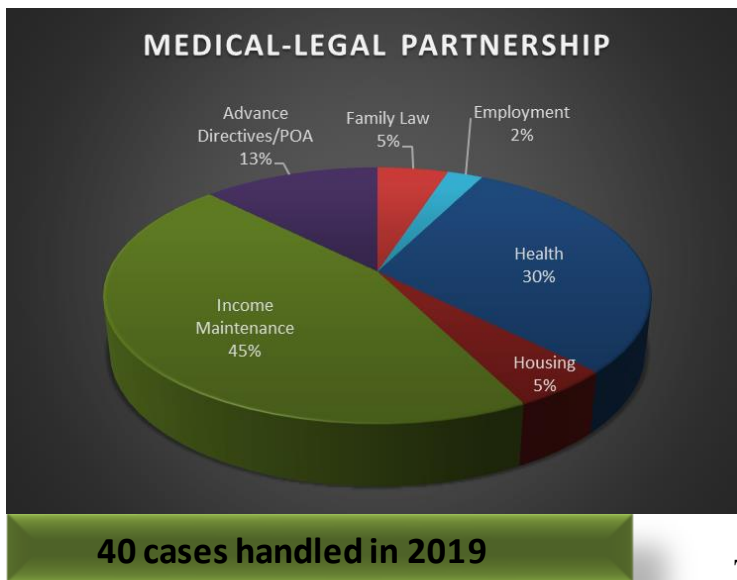
## Wyoming Children's Law Center



The Wyoming Children's Law Center (WCLC) provides legal services in cases involving children and families in a variety of areas of law. For example, the WCLC provides advocacy to ensure children receive special education services to which they are entitled, represents children with special needs, and handles family law cases. The WCLC fills a great unmet need. The grant from Equal Justice supports a full-time attorney handling a wide variety of civil legal cases. The WCLC handled 134 cases in FY 2019.

**134 cases handled in 2019**

## Laramie County Community Partnership



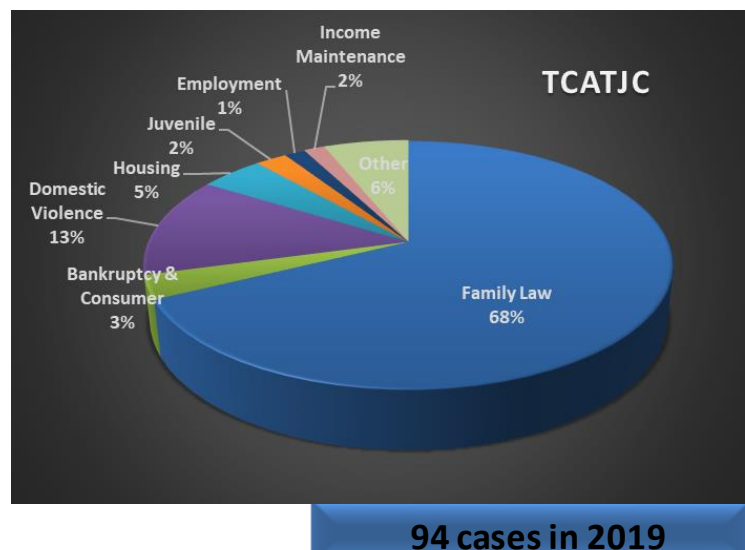
The Laramie County Community Partnership (“LCCP”) received a grant from Equal Justice to launch Wyoming’s first Medical-Legal Partnership (“MLP”). MLPs are quickly expanding across the country to address health-harming legal issues. The MLP addresses a wide range of legal issues ranging from legal help to have a landlord address mold that is causing asthma attacks to helping clients receive benefits under their health insurance or public benefits to which they are entitled in order to obtain and pay for medical care and necessary medications.

The MLP places a lawyer into a medical team to identify and address patients’ legal needs to improve their health. The MLP entered into a

partnership with HealthWorks medical clinic in Cheyenne, but also receives referrals from other health care providers. In FY 2019, the MLP provided legal services to address 40 health-harming issues.

## Teton County Access to Justice Center

The Teton County Access to Justice Center (“TCATJC”) was launched in 2012 with funding from Equal Justice. The TCATJC is housed in space donated by Teton County and shares the space with the county law library. The TCATJC provides legal information and self-help services to Teton, Sublette, and Lincoln Counties. Eligible applicants may also apply for legal representation through a panel of private contract attorneys who provide legal services at no charge to the client. The services are paid at a reduced rate from the Equal Justice grant funds.



Equal Justice also added a new grantee in 2019. The **University of Wyoming Civil Legal Services Clinic** received a grant to add a full-time staff attorney in addition to the Faculty Director. The project is in the early stages, but the attorney handled **13 cases**, primarily in housing and family law matters, in FY 2019. We look forward to seeing the progress of this new project over the next year.

## Financial Summary

The revenue generated from filing fees that funds Equal Justice has declined significantly over the past three years. We have been able to recoup some of the decreased revenue through new sources of funding, but we continue to closely monitor the situation. We have reserve funds available to meet our obligations and remain within our spending authority, but we must take steps in the next biennium to address the continued decline in our revenue.

## Additional Revenue

In 2015, Equal Justice also began receiving additional funding from the increase in pro hac vice fees paid by out-of-state attorneys. \$100 of the pro hac vice fee goes to Equal Justice Wyoming to help support civil legal services. The fees are earmarked to be used for grants and the funds have been used over the past year to supplement funding the University of Wyoming Civil Legal Services Clinic at the College of Law. We appreciate the State Bar's support for access to justice.

We also expanded our grant program through additional VOCA and Surcharge funds in 2019. As we add new resources, programs, and initiatives, we will continue to explore additional funding to support our work.

## Summary of Expenditures

Salaries and Benefits	\$332,680
Office Expense and Travel	\$31,620
Telecommunications	\$3,493
<b>Grants*</b>	
Legal Aid of Wyoming	\$347,592
Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault	\$813,436
Wyoming Children's Law Center	\$76,958
Teton County Access to Justice Center	\$103,178
Laramie County Community Partnership	\$79,373
UW Civil Legal Services Clinic	\$38,275
<b>Special Services</b>	\$7,345
<b>Total*</b>	<b>\$1,833,950</b>

\*Includes the June 2019 grant expenditures which were paid in July 2019.

**Vision** - Equal access to justice for the people of Wyoming.

**Mission** - Serving the legal needs of low-income persons of Wyoming through community engagement, education, information, and expansion of legal services throughout the state.

**Equal Justice Wyoming**  
**2300 Capitol Ave. 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Cheyenne, Wyoming 82002**  
**[www.equaljustice.wy.gov](http://www.equaljustice.wy.gov)**