

# Overview

Community Justice Connect is a network of neighborhood storefront sites that trains community volunteers to provide free legal information, resources, and referrals to their neighbors. People facing civil legal challenges in areas such as housing, public benefits, employment, family law, and immigration, can get help before these issues escalate into crises requiring court intervention.

## Access to Civil Justice

Civil law affects many crucial aspects of people's daily lives, including housing, families, government benefits, and wages. Tenants facing unsafe conditions in their home or missed rent payments, parents struggling to afford child support, families experiencing unemployment or rising debt, are often viewed as personal difficulties rather than civil justice issues.<sup>[1]</sup> In reality, these issues are often intertwined: a loss of income can make it impossible to cover both rent and child support, causing debt to accumulate rapidly. Civil legal problems, when unresolved, can cause serious harm: forcing people out of their homes, separating families, and imposing devastating financial burdens.

[1] American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Achieving Civil Justice: A Framework for Collaboration* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2024).

While the right to legal counsel for those who cannot afford representation exists in criminal court across the nation, that right does not equally apply to civil courts. Not enough legal services providers are available to represent everyone who qualifies for free legal assistance in family, housing, and other civil courts. As such, many are left to navigate courtrooms and broader legal systems on their own. Even when free legal services are available, they are often accessible after a lawsuit has been filed—leaving those facing



civil justice issues with little support to try to resolve their problems proactively.

Though New York City offers many public resources, it can be difficult to find and access available services. There are a multitude of different public benefits programs, offering different kinds of assistance—each with distinct eligibility requirements, and different application processes. New York Courts offer online legal information such as DIY court forms and legal glossaries, as well as Help Centers. However, many learn about these resources for the first time after they are already facing a civil court case.

## Legal Empowerment Through Community

At Community Justice Connect, visitors receive various forms of assistance to help answer questions and address civil justice issues. Rather than focusing on one particular area of civil justice, Community Justice Connect identifies overlapping issues across multiple areas and connects people with relevant resources. Free walk-in assistance is provided to community members with civil questions, regardless of their residence, status, or income.

The project uses a model in which trained volunteers—often students, retirees, and neighborhood residents—receive in-depth instruction and ongoing supervision from on-site managers, associates, and an attorney. This empowers them to provide their neighbors with free access to legal information and assistance.

Volunteers are trained to address critical access to justice gaps. This includes knowledge of tenant rights across different housing

types, identifying the correct court forms for adjusting child support orders, navigating public benefits systems, and understanding how to access the different civil courthouses throughout New York City. When visitors need more specified assistance, such as legal advice or representation, volunteers make targeted referrals. Storefront sites facilitate workshops, events, and partnerships with local community organizations based on community need: responding to trends and concerns that visitors raise, helping ensure timely and relevant services.

Community Justice Connect’s dual mission is to advance legal empowerment through: 1) accessible, upstream civil legal support that prevents issues from escalating into court cases, and 2) in-depth training for community volunteers who want to learn how to navigate complex legal systems.

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Community Justice Connect is a program of the Center for Justice Innovation, a community justice organization that centers safety and racial justice in partnership with communities, courts, and the people most impacted. The program operates in the following locations:

- 3213A Third Ave., Bronx, NY 10451

*BronxConnect@innovatingjustice.org*

- 250 Kingston Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11213

*CrownHeightsConnect@innovatingjustice.org*

- 149-13 Jamaica Ave., Jamaica, NY 11435

*JamaicaConnect@innovatingjustice.org*