

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



BLUE RIDGE
LEGAL SERVICES

THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY SERVING THE
SHENANDOAH AND ROANOKE VALLEYS

P.O. Box 551
Harrisonburg, VA 22803

WWW.BRLS.ORG

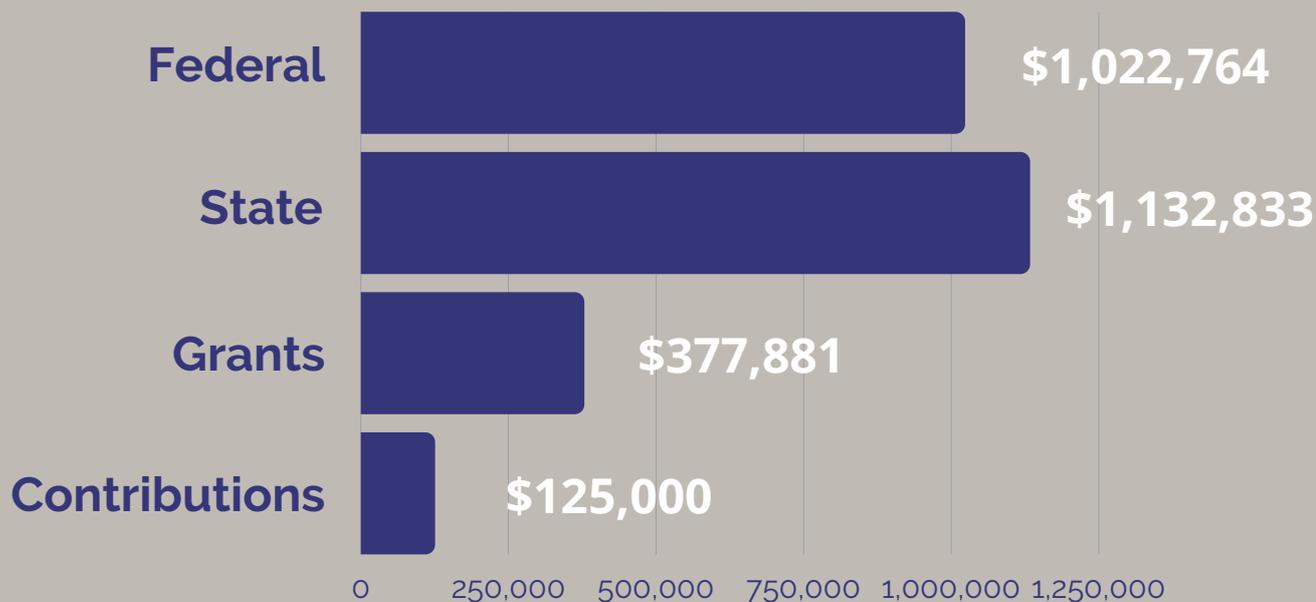
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FINANCIALS

JANUARY 2020 - DECEMBER 2020



Total Revenue: \$3,077,779

Administrative
11.9%



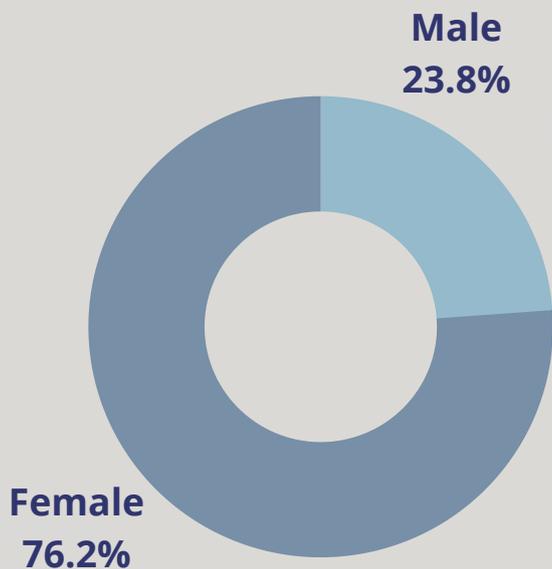
Legal Services
88.1%



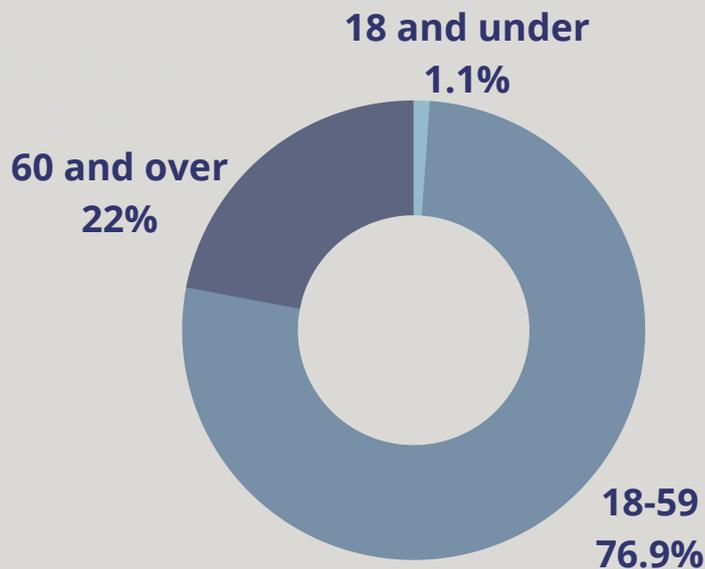
WHO ARE OUR CLIENTS?

BRLS' Client Population

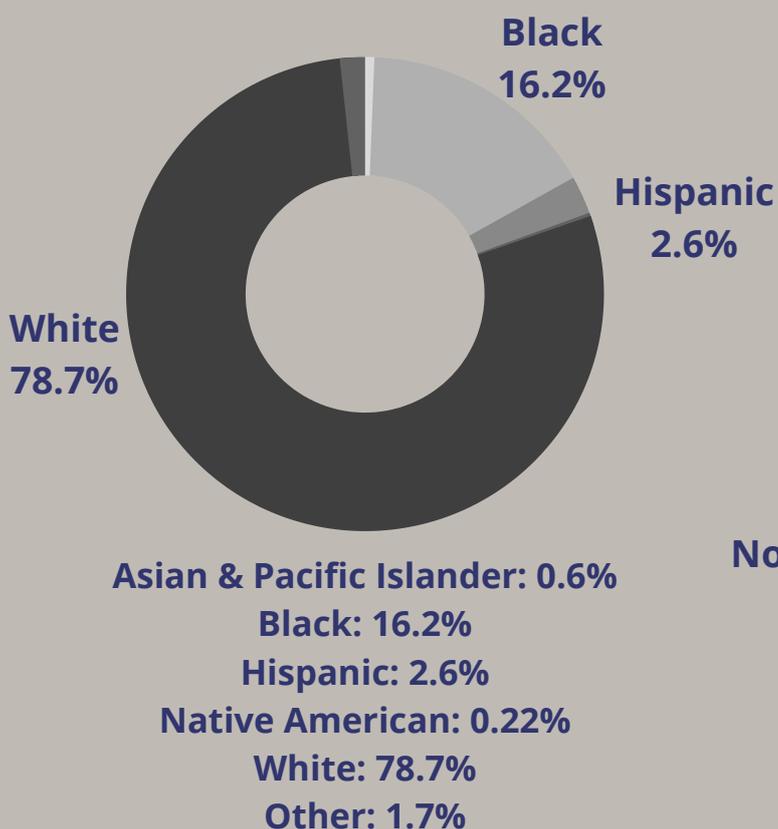
Gender



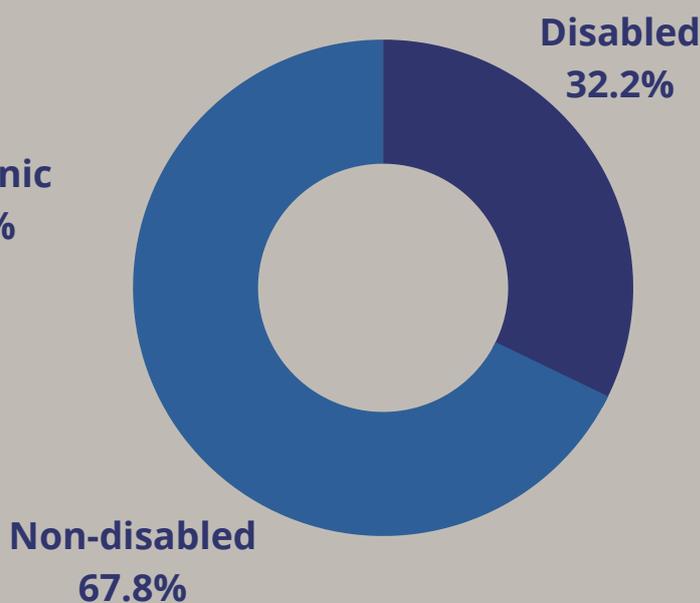
Age



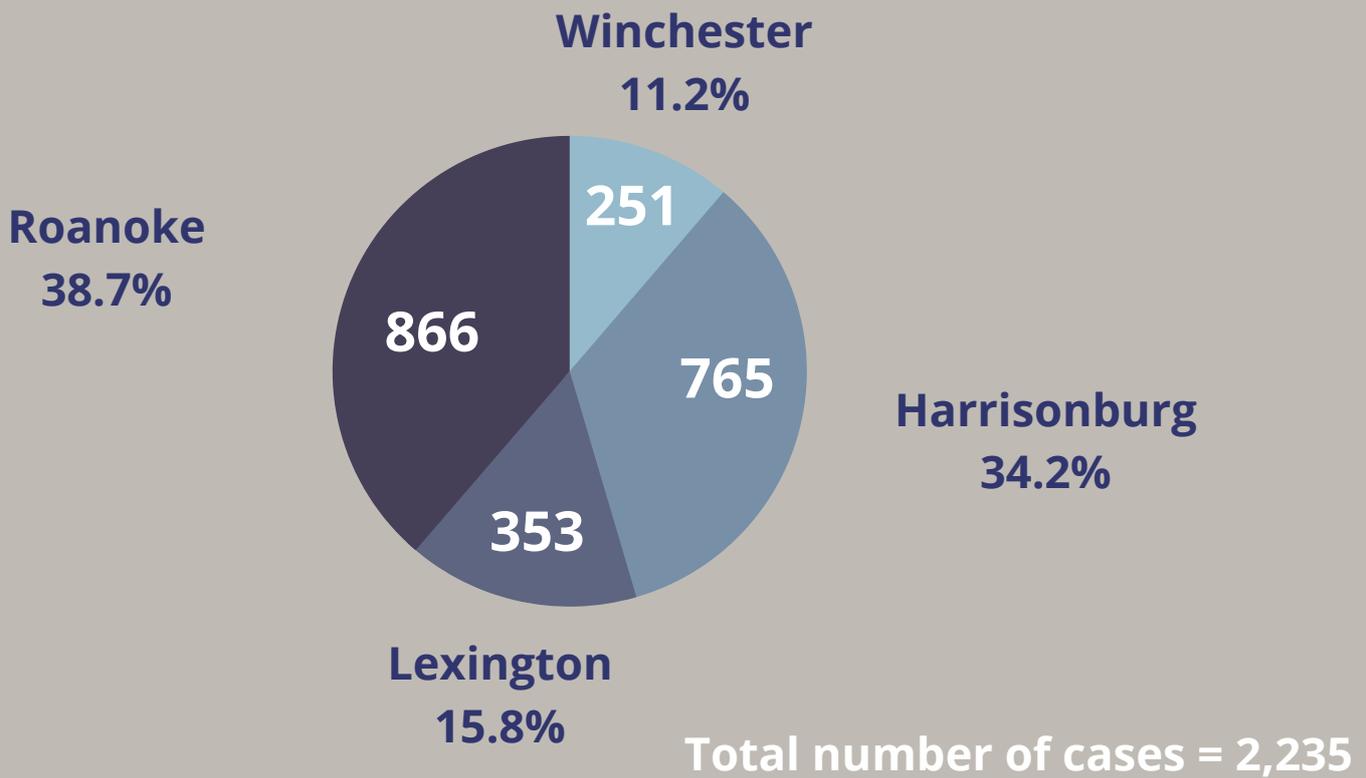
Race/Ethnicity



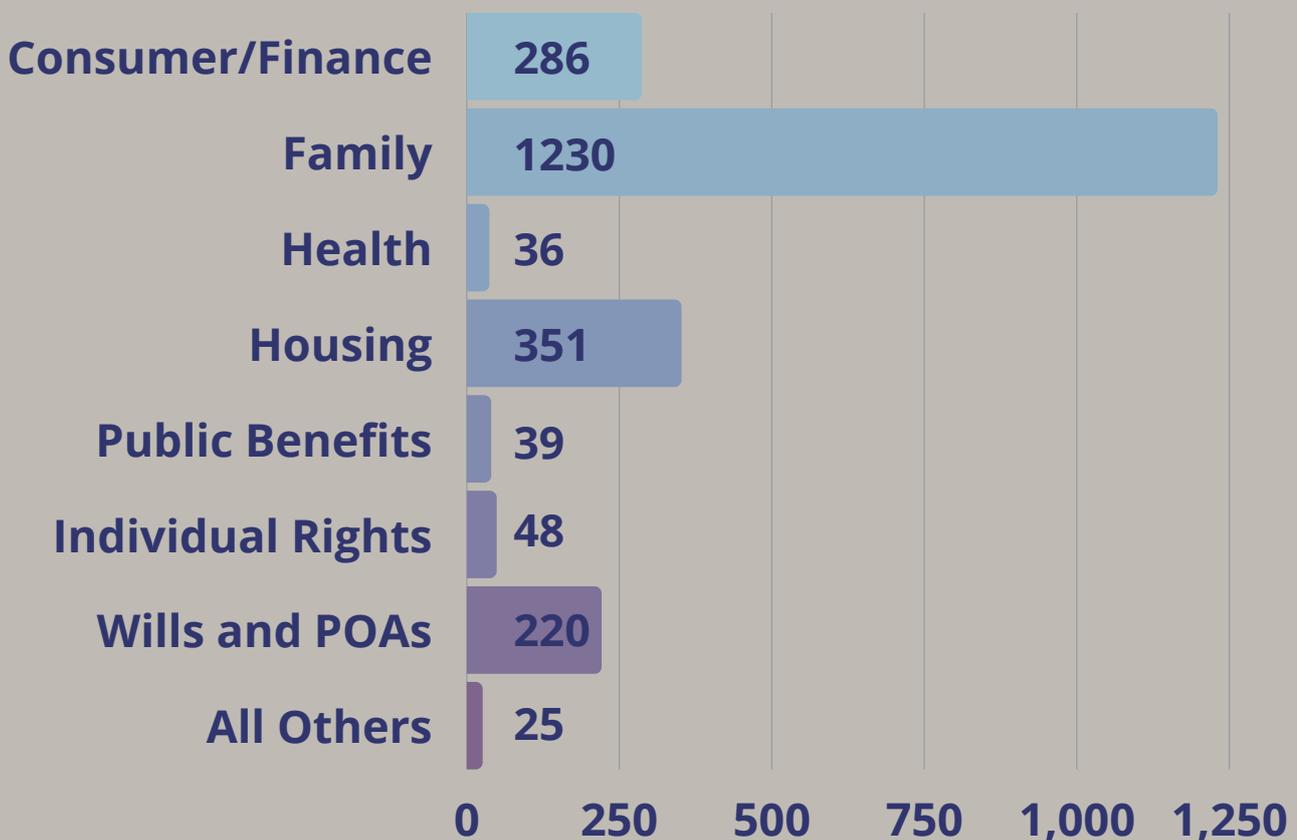
Disability Status



CASES CLOSED IN 2020



CASES CLOSED BY LEGAL ISSUE

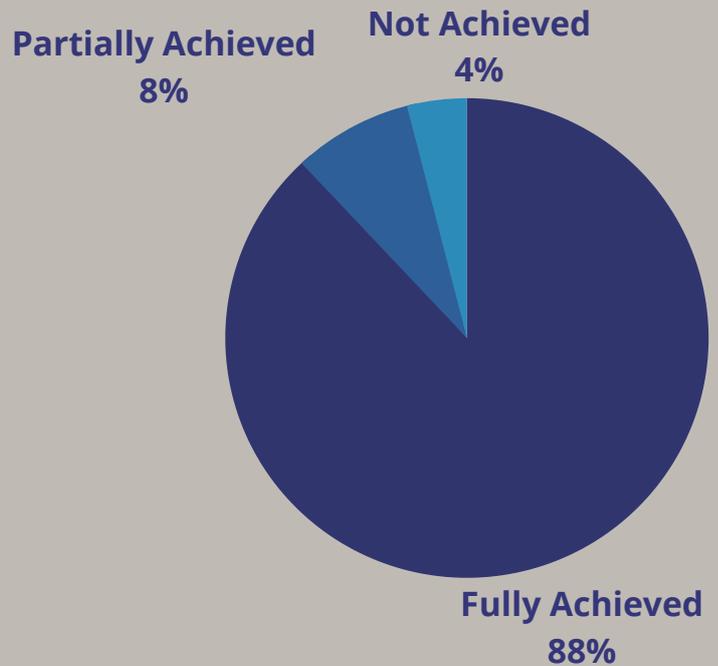
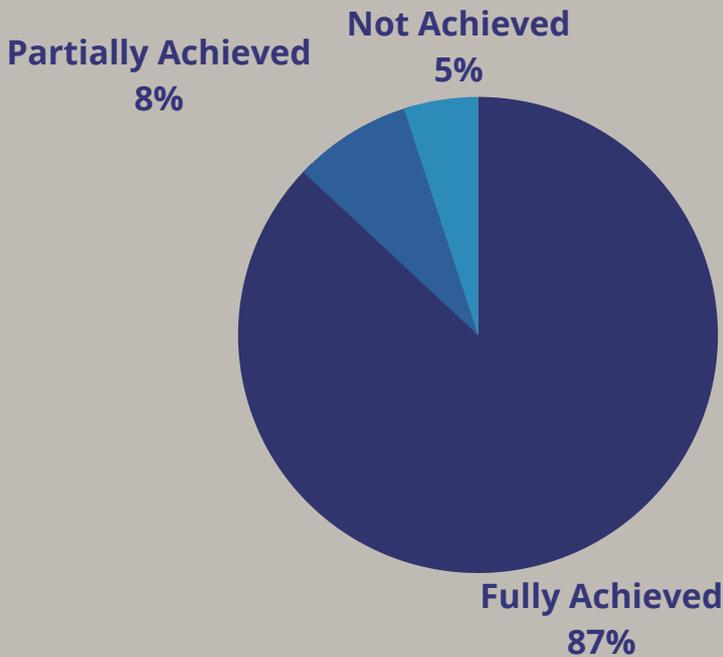


CASE OUTCOMES

In the **681** cases involving on-going representation, we fully achieved our clients' goals in **87%** of the cases, and partially achieved them in another **8%**.

Cases closed by Volunteer Attorneys
Total Cases = 108

Cases closed by BRLS Staff
Total Cases = 573



TYPES OF LEGAL SERVICES PROVIDED

On-going representation
35.1%



Advice or Limited Services
64.9%

OUTCOMES SUMMARY

In 2020, we achieved 2,575 outcomes for 2,235 clients that benefitted 6,083 low-income people, including lump sum recoveries of \$497,728; affirmative monthly recoveries of \$37,899; avoiding \$1,742,147 in lump sum debts or damages; and \$29,688 in monthly obligations.

Here's a look at some of the specific outcomes BRLS staff and pro bono attorneys achieved for our clients in 2020:



Prevented evictions for 62 families and delayed evictions for 31 families



Obtained court protection for 37 victims of domestic violence, including 2 elderly clients



Obtained divorces or annulments for 314 clients and provided advice and counsel to 709 clients on family-related issues



Obtained, preserved, or increased Medicaid benefits for 17 clients and advised 10 clients on health care issues



Obtained child custody orders for 81 clients and preserved child visitation rights for 14 clients



Assisted 36 households overwhelmed by debt in obtaining bankruptcy discharges, providing them with a fresh financial start while discharging \$1,456,815 in bad debts and recovering \$9,866 in garnished wages



Drafted 141 living wills, powers of attorney, or health care proxy documents

2020 DEVELOPMENTS

ELDER JUSTICE PROJECT

Protecting the rights of low-income seniors has long been a priority for BRLS. Since the beginning of the organization in the 1970s, we have always had an elderly services paralegal on staff, along with an elderly services attorney position which we added nearly twenty years ago. In 2020, BRLS was awarded two separate fellowship grants from organizations specializing in elder justice. Each fellow's work focuses on specific issues facing seniors, such as elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation, or providing direct outreach to seniors living in rural areas.

Along with representing these clients, our elder justice team holds regular meetings to coordinate community outreach and support efforts to meet the legal needs of seniors across our region.



EVICITION DEFENSE AND COURTROOM OUTREACH

As the pandemic impacted localities across the country last year, many of our local courts struggled to keep tenants and landlords informed of the frequently changing federal and state eviction protections enacted. At the suggestion of our Lexington office's managing attorney, BRLS reached out to judges in our service area offering to attend their docket calls for evictions to inform tenants of the availability of our services. During the fall of 2020, BRLS attorneys made over 20 appearances at docket calls. Considering the success of this project, we plan to continue appearing at docket calls post-pandemic.



2020 DEVELOPMENTS

LEGAL AID AND THE PANDEMIC

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been committed to adapting our services so that we can continue meeting the critical legal needs of low-income people. The pandemic posed challenges to our organization that allowed us to construct new methods of service delivery and maintain our commitment to helping our vulnerable client population. When we closed our doors to the public in March 2020, we transitioned to conducting intake for new cases entirely over the phone and through our online application on our website. Through this system, we continued opening new cases for legal issues arising out of the pandemic to ensure that those in our service area weren't without access to justice over this time. BRLS also purchased new technology to accommodate staff members working from home and to enable our attorneys to hold virtual meetings with clients.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEGAL AID FUNDING

Over the last year, BRLS pursued many additional funding opportunities as a response to the impacts of the pandemic on our community. Community Foundations, United Ways, and localities across our service area offered numerous grant programs and relief funds aimed at meeting the increased need for non-profit assistance in our community. We identified key legal problems that affected our clients as a result of the pandemic and sought targeted funding for these issues. Housing was a main focus of our legal work throughout the pandemic, as we saw increases in the number of evictions due to so many people falling behind on rent and mortgage payments. Additionally, high rates of unemployment across the state created a strain on the unemployment system, causing many individuals with valid claims to be denied. In 2020, BRLS received over \$100,000 in grant funding for our legal work in pandemic-related relief efforts.

CLIENT IMPACT: CASE STORIES

Read the stories below to understand how accessing justice has transformed the lives of our clients.

Leslie, originally a resident of Augusta County, contacted BRLS for assistance with a custody case involving her twelve-year-old son. Leslie was a victim of domestic violence who shared a son with her abuser. After the father of her son committed a physical assault against her, Leslie took her son and fled to another state to live with family members. At first, the father left Leslie and her son alone for a few months before he filed for custody of the twelve-year-old in Augusta County. At the custody trial, the BRLS attorney showed that the child's father had a bad temper, especially when drunk, by sharing a phone call between the father and the son where he said damaging things about our client's character. Despite the child repeatedly asking his father to stop, he told his son that he wishes the boy "had a real mother" and when he grows up, he will see "who the real parent was." With this evidence, the judge found that our client moving her son away from the father was in the child's best interest and awarded Leslie with primary physical custody. The father was granted visitation with the child every other weekend and time during summer vacations. Lastly, the judge ordered that when the father is visiting with his son, he is not to consume any alcohol.

Ms. Jones is a 72-year-old woman living in Rockbridge County who contacted BRLS for assistance with an issue related to her housing. Ms. Jones lived in a mobile home which sat on an eighteen acre property. Though she had lifetime rights through a life estate to stay in the trailer, one day she received a notice on her door informing her that she would have to vacate the property by the first of the month. Ms. Jones was being evicted from the property because her son had inherited the eighteen acre property and was motivated to sell it. Through the help of one of our staff attorneys in the Lexington office, BRLS was able to obtain a life estate in two acres of the property where the trailer sat, which provided security to Ms. Jones and resolved her very hostile housing situation. Additionally, our attorney obtained a payment of \$12,000 for our client as well as some repairs to the trailer, including the septic system and some other issues.

CASE STORIES AND CLIENT QUOTES

Joel and Pete were two of several long-term residents of a motel in Winchester who contacted BRLS for assistance. When the motel was sold in the early months of 2020, residents who had lived there for years were at risk of being evicted. When the residents went to pay their March rent, they were told by outgoing management that everyone had to be out by March 15th. The BRLS attorney wrote a letter to the old owners explaining that the Virginia Residential Landlord and Tenant Act (VRLTA) protects tenants who have occupied a motel room as their primary residence for more than 90 days. The letter eventually got to the new owners of the motel, who then contacted BRLS and committed to obeying the law and working with our clients. These clients were served with the appropriate notices to terminate their month-to-month tenancies and were eventually served with unlawful detainers. In the meantime, our BRLS attorney worked to find resources and connect these clients with affordable housing. Though affordable housing was difficult to find, Joel and Pete finally found an apartment to rent together and moved in on the date of the first hearing for the unlawful detainer. Lastly, our attorney negotiated with the owners of the motel to vacate the judgements of possession against our clients to ensure that Joel and Pete would have the best chances at finding housing in the future.

"I was being evicted and I have my 3 year old grandson in my custody. I didn't have anywhere else to go with him. I have recommended your firm to friends of mine who were having the same problem with housing. I was so stressed out and my anxiety was so high because of the way I was being treated. I am so thankful for all the help and understanding I received."

-BRLS client, Page County

"If it wasn't for your organization, I would not had any means to get out of a toxic, taken for granted marriage. Thank you for helping me become stronger....for your kind and generous vision to make available an opportunity for someone in my circumstance."

-BRLS Client, Roanoke

BRLS OFFICE LOCATIONS

Harrisonburg

204 N. High Street
Harrisonburg, VA 22802
(540)-433-1830

Winchester

303 S. Loudoun Street, Suite D
Winchester, VA 22601
(540)-662-5021

Lexington

215 South Main Street
Lexington, VA 24450
(540)-463-7334

Roanoke

132 Campbell Avenue SW, Suite 300
Roanoke, VA 24011
(540)-344-2080

