



# [ *to* OVERCOME ]

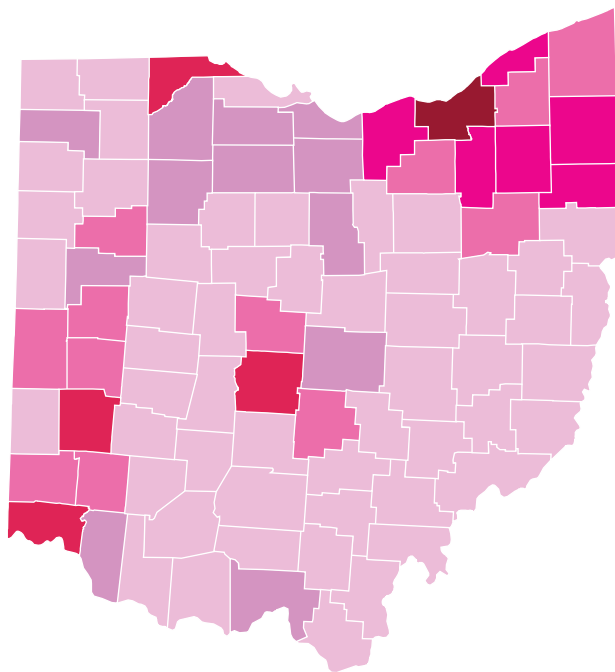
2021 ANNUAL REPORT



Disability  
Rights OHIO



**IN A YEAR SO FRAUGHT WITH CHALLENGES** - challenges for people with disabilities wanting to live and receive services in their communities, challenges to students in getting the education to which they are guaranteed, and challenges against the independence and very existence of our organization - one common thread emerged throughout the story of our work: [to **OVERCOME**]. Despite every barrier faced in 2021, by both our team and the communities we serve, our mission pushed forward. Undeterred by challenges, we are excited to share our successes with our allies and supporters, as all those who rallied beside us and behind us throughout 2021 were the catalyst by which these results came to be.



## CLIENT COUNT

0 - 29	100 - 249
30 - 49	250 - 999
50 - 99	<1,000

**DRO SERVED  
5,865 CLIENTS  
IN FY 2021**

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## THE DISABILITY RIGHTS OHIO VISION

We envision a society in which people with disabilities are full and equal members, enjoy the rights and opportunities of all people, are self-directed, make decisions about where, how and with whom they will live, learn, work and play, have access to needed services and supports, and are free from abuse, neglect, exploitation and discrimination.

DRO FIELDDED

6,839

REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE  
WHILE WORKING PRIMARILY  
FROM HOME.

DRO PERFORMED  
INVESTIGATIONS AND  
MONITORING ACTIVITIES AT

93 LOCATIONS

WITH A HYBRID OF  
REMOTE MONITORING AND  
IN-PERSON VISITS.

DRO PROVIDED TRAINING  
AND SUPPORT AT

89

VIRTUAL CONFERENCES.

SUBMITTED  
ADMINISTRATIVE  
COMMENTS, TESTIMONY,  
AND ADVOCACY LETTERS  
TO IMPACT

25

PIECES OF LEGISLATION.

RESPONDED TO  
ASSISTANCE REQUESTS IN

88

OF OHIO'S 88 COUNTIES.





## [ *to* OVERCOME ]

**CHALLENGES SO OHIOANS WITH DISABILITIES  
CAN LIVE, WORK, GO, AND RECEIVE SERVICES  
WHERE AND HOW THEY CHOOSE**

**Ensuring that people with disabilities are empowered to integrate into their communities has always been central to the mission of our organization.** As the impacts of COVID-19 continue to disrupt our daily lives, it remains even more crucial that people with disabilities can live, work, and go where they choose. Throughout this past year, we continued to advocate with the Ohio Home and Community-Based Services Coalition – a group dedicated to protecting and expanding home community based services (HCBS) in Ohio. Over 150 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. In 2021 the advocacy of this coalition bore fruit, with historic investments being made by the state legislature into the HCBS system.

Complicating efforts to expand home and community-based services is the current provider workforce crisis. Fueled by the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and a challenging labor market, there are simply not enough service providers currently to meet demand. People with disabilities rely on these nurses, home care workers, and personal aides to live and receive their services in home and community-based settings. Throughout 2021, we worked on multiple fronts to address this crisis by advocating for increased wages and funding and improved access to services.

Our Short Term Assistance Team worked to help individuals and their families understand alternatives to guardianship, and presented several training opportunities on Supported Decision Making.

“

OVER THE PAST YEAR, MY TEAM AND I WRAPPED UP A MAJOR INVESTIGATION OF CUYAHOGA COUNTY CORRECTIONS CENTER, AND BEGAN TO IMAGINE WHAT OUR JAIL/PRISON WORK LOOKS LIKE GOING FORWARD. ADOPTING A MORE ABOLITIONIST STANCE IS STEERING OUR WORK IN NEW, FRESH DIRECTIONS. WE ALSO SHIFTED AWAY FROM ADVOCATING FOR INDIVIDUALS' NEEDS TO A MORE SYSTEMIC APPROACH, FOCUSING ON REDUCING/ELIMINATING INCARCERATIONS RATHER THAN IMPROVING CONDITIONS AT FACILITIES.”

Julie Keys, DRO Attorney

## FEATURED STORY

### ENGAGING OUR COMMUNITY

**Jordan Ballinger, DRO Policy Director, identified the need to bridge the social gap between disabled Ohioans and our team at DRO.**

Members of the disabled community needed a space where they could voice their concerns. When Alexia Kemerling joined Disability Rights Ohio as our Community Engagement Coordinator in 2021, things seemed to fall into place.



When Alexia stepped into her new role she immediately began brainstorming projects. Her own disability allowed her to connect with disabled community members in ways traditional outreach programs aren't able to do. Her projects empowered and amplified disabled voices rather than diluting them through able-bodied messengers.

Since beginning her role, she has taken part in the Breaking Silences Advocacy Committee, hosted by Maria Matzik at the Access Center for Independent Living in Dayton; The Ohio Advocacy Task Force, chaired by James Harley; and the Ohio Olmstead Task Force, co-chaired by Katie Shelley and Renee Wood; as well as collaborations with Centers for Independent Living around the state.

Alexia's passion for advocacy brought life to the Community Engagement Coordinator position. As we advocate for the rights of disabled Ohioans, we must consider how challenging and isolating things can be for some clients. Alexia's projects supported disabled community members and empowered them through self-advocacy.



## [ *to* OVERCOME ]

### THE LINGERING ISSUES CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continued to present challenges around the world and within our communities throughout 2021.**

Understanding that Ohioans with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted throughout this crisis, our team remained focused on developing, updating, and amplifying resources to ensure accurate, relevant information was available to all. With regular changes to public health orders and mandates, COVID-19 and its impacts touched nearly every area of our work; from Special Education and Ballot Access, to Housing and Employment.

New COVID-19 variants brought about even more concern and confusion. Our team developed guidance to inform people with disabilities about their rights within the healthcare system, where we continued to fight against rationing of care and the devastating effect it would have on our communities.

As the breakthrough COVID-19 vaccines gained approval, we worked with both our partners locally and other Protection & Advocacy Agencies (P&A's) across the country to create informational and awareness campaigns about the vaccines, individuals' rights to receive the vaccine, and direction for those who needed assistance to get the vaccine. This campaign included several videos - available in multiple languages - that explained the vaccine and the process to receive it.



**THROUGH THIS PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE, INTAKE HAS MANAGED TO KEEP THE INTAKE HOTLINE OPEN THAT ALLOWS CLIENTS TO REACH OUT TO DRO FOR AID IN THEIR TIME OF CRISIS. OUR TEAM HAS STRUGGLED WITH STAFF SHORTAGES AND A FEW TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES BUT WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO MANAGE THROUGH THESE TIMES AND MAINTAIN A CONSISTENT FLOW."**

*John Ramsey, Intake Team Leader*



DRO partnered with organizations across the country to create videos in multiple different languages explaining individuals' rights to access the COVID-19 vaccine.





## [ *to* OVERCOME ]

### THE BARRIERS KEEPING STUDENTS FROM RECEIVING THE FREE AND APPROPRIATE EDUCATION THEY DESERVE

All students in Ohio deserve a “FAPE”— Free and Appropriate Public Education. For so many, this becomes just a buzzword... not a call to action. **The law is clear: All students with disabilities should receive a free and appropriate public education.** This statement remains true from year to year and is at the core of our work in education. Our Special Education team and Special Education Fellow program continued this year **to overcome** the disturbance of services caused by the pandemic, while focusing also on both larger systemic needs and individualized needs.

Two key projects in systemic advocacy this year have included two district wide complaints regarding the effects of COVID on students with disabilities and race-based discrimination and the disproportionate use of discipline. These projects embrace our commitments to intersectionality and have continued focus on underserved populations. Additionally, our Special Education Team has had a significantly high level of positive case outcomes again this year, which means we are positively impacting a lot of children. We believe in a world where one day the education needs of students with disabilities will not have to be labeled as “special,” because they are no different than the rights of others to a good quality education.



IT IS REWARDING TO WORK IN EDUCATION BECAUSE WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO IMPACT LIVES AT AN EARLY AGE, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE TO INTERVENE AND EFFECT CHANGE. OFTEN, OUR INTERVENTION SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVES THE SITUATION FOR THE STUDENT AND FAMILY AND SETS THE STAGE FOR BETTER LIFE OUTCOMES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ADULTHOOD. WE WORK DIRECTLY WITH PEOPLE AND HELP THEM TO LEARN TO HELP THEMSELVES.”

Kristin Hildebrant, *Senior Attorney*



## SPECIAL EDUCATION CLINICS

**In mid-2021, the Special Education team introduced the Free Special Education Clinics in partnership with The Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD) and Albeit Weiker LLP. The response from our community was immense.**



Participation in this year's Special Education Clinics demonstrated the challenges being faced by families trying to protect students' access to the free and appropriate education they are entitled to by law.

Because of the clinics, students and parents were able to dive deep into the world of Special Education without judgment, and connect with attorneys, advocates and experts in the field to receive important one-on-one attention and intervention guidance for their students.

With several clinics remaining this year and the need ever-present amid the continued struggles of the pandemic, we know these events will continue to make an impact in the lives of students in Ohio. So far, DRO with the help of their partners have hosted topics relating to tips for parents, special education jargon, autism awareness, understanding AD/HD, and so much more.



## [ *to* OVERCOME ]

### THE RISKS FACED BY OHIOANS WITH DISABILITIES WHEN INTERACTING WITH POLICE

#### **Building off the success of our 2020 report - *"Policing and Racial Injustice: A Disability Rights Perspective: Impacts and Solutions"***

- our team continued throughout the last year to identify issues and propose solutions in these areas where race and disability intersect. The facts remain painfully clear: BIPOC people with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to be injured, killed, or arrested by police. Despite representing only 20 percent of the population, those with disabilities make up 30 to 50 percent of individuals subject to police use of force. An estimated one-third to one-half of people killed by police are people with disabilities. Additionally, the risk of being subjected to police violence increases as disability intersects with race, class, gender, and LGBTQ+ status.

Throughout 2021, we continued to push for meaningful change in the way emergency services in our communities respond to crises. We've partnered with a coalition of other groups and individuals to push for an anti-racist, trauma-informed, non-policing mental health crisis response system. By centering this work on the experiences and perspectives of people of color who have disabilities and who have been harmed by police interactions, we can ensure that our advocacy is appropriate and effective.

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I BELIEVE IN FIGHTING  
ALONGSIDE MY COLLEAGUES  
FOR A BETTER WORLD AND  
BEING PART OF A MOVEMENT  
THAT IS CONSTANTLY  
GROWING STRONGER AND  
MORE INTERSECTIONAL.”

Kevin Truitt,  
DRO Legal Advocacy Director



In July of 2021, DRO's  
report *"Policing and  
Racial Injustice:  
A Disability Rights  
Perspective"* was  
included in the United  
Nations publication,  
*"Agenda Towards  
Transformative Change  
for Racial Injustice  
and Equality"*.





## [ *to* OVERCOME ]

### SITUATIONS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

**One of the pillars of our work is monitoring and investigating situations of abuse, neglect and exploitation throughout the state in order to deliver a more just society.** Throughout the course of last year, our Abuse and Neglect Team (A&N) continued to collaborate and advocate in order to achieve substantial success in a number of individual and systemic projects. One of the best outcomes of 2021 for our A&N team was the official closing of both the residential treatment facility (RTF) and the acute psychiatric hospital operated by Sequel Pomegranate Health Systems. Following our investigation, our A&N team uncovered serious and systemic cases of abuse and neglect, violations of safety and treatment standards, inappropriate use of restraint, peer-to-peer bullying and staff intimidation, and overall infringement of civil rights. Currently, our A&N team is working to uplift the stories of the “Survivors of Sequel” and collaborate with the National Juvenile Justice Network, Ohio Juvenile Justice Coalition and other advocates with OhioMHAS.

The team has also been involved this year in monitoring that addresses larger systemic needs that will have consequences for years to come. Across all types of facilities the team found a presence of some level of a staffing crisis related to the hiring and/or retention of quality staff primarily but not solely due to rate of pay, the COVID pandemic, and vaccine adoption and/or mandates. Additionally, the A&N team noticed in their work an overall lack of trauma-informed care in youth facilities.

Another unfortunate systemic pattern the A&N team uncovered were concerns about gender identity, especially related to transgender youth, and the lack of gender affirming practices and protocols in a number of RTFs. These are just a few of the other ways our A&N team has cared for Ohioans who use and rely on facilities and expect them to be just and fair.

Lastly, the A&N team continued their work in monitoring dependent on the conscientious Remote Monitoring Best Practices which our team was honored to share at the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) Conference this past year. The A&N Team Leader and Rep Payee Team Leader were also invited to present on Effective Cross-Team Collaboration, further showing the strength of our advocacy in areas that can be the most challenging. Our DRO A&N Team has also collaborated with other state Protection and Advocacy (P & A) agencies, like in their communication with Disability Rights Michigan into monitoring activities that helped to provide improvements for youth in another Ohio RTF.

As we seek **to overcome** these continued challenges for disabled Ohioans in 2022, we know the work of our Abuse and Neglect team will remain at the forefront as some of our most vital advocacy. In 2022 and beyond, we remain extraordinarily grateful for our Abuse and Neglect team and the hard work they accomplish.



## FEATURED STORY

### DUCK DERBY FUNDRAISER

**In the summer of 2021, hundreds of rubber ducks raced down the Muskingum and Ohio Rivers towards a brighter future for Ohioans with disabilities.**

Our Duck Derby fundraiser raised money and awareness while connecting community members across Ohio in a unique way. Energy for the Duck Derby was high even though much of it was virtual given the circumstances of the world at that time. Every \$5 donation offered participants a numbered rubber duck and a chance of winning different prizes.

Our first-ever Duck Derby brought together countless volunteers to fund and support the civil and legal rights of people with disabilities. Bill Bauer, DRO board member, designed and initiated the fundraiser and recruited the Marietta High School Crew team to help guide the ducks down the river. His creativity generated an incredible experience for DRO clients and community partners.

The Washington County Board of DD graciously donated \$500 towards Duck Derby and marketed our cause across their social media channels. DRO Executive Director, Kerstin Sjoberg, live streamed the race on Facebook, offering DRO's followers the ability to support the Duck Derby no matter where they were.



3000 rubber ducks raced down the Muskingum and Ohio Rivers



# A MESSAGE FROM OUR **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

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Reflecting on the challenges faced in the past year - challenges for our community and challenges for our organization - I could not be more proud of the perseverance and commitment displayed by our team, supporters, and allies.

I am proud of our intersectional approach and the way we were able to more successfully advocate for people with disabilities, who are much more likely to experience multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization. I am proud of our team's work in elevating the voices and lived experiences of Ohioans with disabilities, empowering them by ensuring they are at the center of our advocacy. I am proud of the gigantic amount of work our relatively small team was able to accomplish over the past year... a feat made possible only through the commitment every person here has to our mission.

Being able to turn the page on an incredibly challenging year and still share success stories like these is a remarkable accomplishment. With the promise of a new year, new advocacy, and new challenges ahead, we can't wait to see what's in store.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kerstin Sjoberg". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and larger than the rest of the letters.

Kerstin Sjoberg, *Executive Director*

# OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Guiding an organization with a mission as broad and impactful as ours requires unique lived experiences and a focus on advocacy. Our Board of Directors is incredibly unique in that each of its 15 members has life experience as a person with a disability, as the relative of someone with a disability, or as a professional in the disability space. This perspective informs and shapes our strategic vision and guides every initiative we take. In facing each challenge that comes 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:**

- Bill Bauer, *President*
- Susan Koller, *Vice President*
- Jennilee Mohler, *Secretary*
- Jordy Stringer, *Treasurer*
- Tia Braun
- Douglas Kidd
- Mykal Leslie
- Matt O'Nesti
- Narad Nepal
- Ron Patton
- Jeffrey Pollock
- Norma Ramos-Prater
- Amelia Whorton
- Andrea Williams
- TyKiah Wright





## OUR FINANCIALS

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**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.

### 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

## OUR NUMBERS

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PROTECTION/ADVOCACY &  
CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

\$3,681,885

ADMINISTRATIVE & GENERAL

\$1,226,134

OTHER PROGRAMS

\$460,725

FUNDRAISING

\$11,771

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**TOTAL**

**\$5,380,515**

“

OUR VISION IS OUR GUIDING STAR. IT HOLDS OUR CORE VALUES ABOUT THE EQUAL WORTH AND DIGNITY OF ALL PEOPLE, THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SOCIETY TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS TO ENSURE EQUAL RIGHTS AND ACCESS, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES TO RAISE UP THEIR VOICES, SET THEIR OWN GOALS AND MAKE THEIR OWN CHOICES ABOUT ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE.”

Kerstin Sjoberg, *Executive Director*



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

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