**Goals and Objectives for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2024**

*OCTOBER 1, 2023, TO SEPTEMBER 30, 2024*

**Disability Rights Ohio** is a nonprofit organization committed to advocating for an equitable Ohio for people with disabilities. As Ohio’s Protection and Advocacy System and Client Assistance Program, DRO advocates so that Ohioans with disabilities are free to live, work, learn, and go where they choose, are equal participants in civic engagement, are free from abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and are able to live their lives with dignity, free from harm, prejudice and discrimination.

We believe that all aspects of our work should be informed and directed by Ohioans with disabilities.  Every year under the leadership of our disability-led Board, we seek community input to focus our advocacy on issues of the highest importance to Ohioans with disabilities and strategies where we can have the most effective impact.  Through hundreds of surveys completed by Ohioans with disabilities - including more than 200 from people living in facility settings - and input from our PAIMI Advisory Council, these new goals and objectives have been informed by the lived experiences of advocates statewide.

These goals cover a wide range of issues, and DRO will use multiple advocacy strategies to address the root causes of discrimination, challenge institutional bias, and promote rights enforcement, independence, and inclusion of people with disabilities.  This includes everything from providing information and referrals, negotiating for a good outcome, bringing administrative actions or court cases where necessary, and educating policymakers about the impact of their decisions on disabled Ohioans.  DRO is not a regulatory agency or policy decision-maker, and it cannot force anyone to stop discriminating against or abusing people with disabilities.  But we can use our advocacy tools to empower disabled Ohioans to be vocal and determined even when systemic forces create barriers, and to bring problems to the attention of decision-makers who can fix them.

DRO also recognizes that people with disabilities have many identities, and through our advocacy we seek to reduce disparities for a world where there are equitable resources for all.  We will prioritize work that promotes this value by directing resources to people with disabilities who are systemically marginalized and subject to multiple forms of discrimination, to achieve justice for people who have been most harmed by exclusion and discrimination.  This includes reaching out to marginalized communities and addressing intersectional discrimination faced by many people with disabilities, including Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+) people, among others.

Finally, and most importantly, throughout all our work, we will listen to people with disabilities about their concerns and elevate their voices, centering their perspectives as the guide for all that we do.

To view this as a PDF document, [**click here**](https://disabilityrightsohio.org/assets/documents/dro-fy23-goals-and-objectives.pdf)**.**

**Strengthening and expanding the community mental health service system.**

* Continue collaboration with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and other stakeholders to implement a pilot program in one or more counties in Ohio for the purpose of evaluating and advocating for long-term, statewide solutions to address widespread segregation of people identified as having serious mental illness in nursing facilities across the state.
* Engage in individual advocacy for people with mental health diagnoses who are in nursing facilities in counties serviced by the pilot program to ensure that this population is provided access to adequate community supports and services in preparation for transition to community living.
* Engage in systemic advocacy to strengthen and expand voluntary, community-based mental health services to prevent law enforcement interactions and involvement in criminal legal systems for people with mental health labels, particularly people of color who are disproportionately affected by these punitive outcomes.
* Conduct outreach to immigrants, refugees, and the deaf community to increase access to a culturally and linguistically competent community mental health services.

**Expanding access to community supports for people with traumatic brain injury**

* Engage in advocacy to improve access to services (e.g., behavioral health services, community services, and Medicaid waivers) for people with traumatic brain injury who are in nursing facilities and are not eligible for services and supports through developmental disabilities.

**Improving access and quality services for youth with disabilities**

* Engage in individual advocacy regarding the implementation of the OhioRISE program to ensure adequate capacity for community-based services, particularly for those at risk of custody relinquishment, foster care placement, or institutionalization.
* Advocate to expand and strengthen community services, address instances of abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and lack of access to education and transition services by monitoring newly established psychiatric youth residential treatment facilities, youth residential treatment facilities, and juvenile detention facilities.
* Provide education, conduct outreach, and collaborate with partners to improve access to community-based services for foster care youth with disabilities.
* Advocate in limited circumstances for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, particularly those who have multiple marginalized identities, that are experiencing barriers becoming eligible for services in the developmental disabilities system and home and community-based waiver programs.

**Supporting disabled people to participate in advocacy and policymaking to address major, systemic issues that directly impact their lives**

* Continue advocacy for increased investments in systems that fund home and community-based services, including addressing the direct care workforce crisis and the elimination of 14(c) sub-minimum wage certificates in Ohio, by centering the experiences and perspectives of disabled people.
* Support and collaborate with disability-led organizations and groups, like Breaking Silences Advisory Committee, the Ohio Olmstead Task Force, and the centers for independent living.
* Address policy proposals that impact the rights of people with disabilities, including access to voluntary, non-coercive mental health services.
* Advocate for full accessibility in the state legislative and administrative process

**Increasing positive educational outcomes for students with disabilities.**

* Provide general information and advice, and conduct trainings, on rights and remedies to students with disabilities, parents, and families, including regularly held legal advice clinics.
* Engage in systemic and individual advocacy to address inadequate access to programming and individualized educational services (such as school-based mental health services and positive behavioral interventions and supports), the use of seclusion and restraint, the use of discipline (suspensions, expulsions), the school-to-prison pipeline, and the existence of racial disparities in these categories.
* Monitor implementation of the DOE settlement agreement and collaborate with community organizations to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.
* Provide short-term assistance or individual advocacy, as appropriate, on special education issues to the students, parents, and families in the eleven DOE school districts and the special education fellowship counties.
* Provide short-term assistance to students who need assistive technology or other access to programming, or who have language barriers or communication needs.
* Engage in policy advocacy and work with the Ohio Department of Education and other stakeholders and advocates.
* Provide self-advocacy materials and resources, conduct trainings, and outreach, and engage in individual and systemic advocacy for transition-age kids and their families, with a focus on access to integrated, competitive employment and vocational rehabilitation services.

**Promoting equity and increasing positive employment outcomes for people with disabilities to prepare for, enter, or remain in the workplace.**

* Continue work on the Seneca Re-Ad litigation to ensure the rights of individuals working in non-integrated work environments are protected, including minimum wage and reasonable accommodations necessary to eliminate discrimination.
* Provide benefits counseling under the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance program within our northern and western county area in Ohio, using the priorities set by the Social Security Administration (including a focus on transition-age youth and veterans), and referrals from the Ticket to Work helpline and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities.
* Provide short-term assistance, including legal information and referrals, on employment discrimination issues in which an employer has denied a person reasonable accommodations for their disability that would enable them to do their job.
* Provide short-term assistance, including legal information and referrals, for disputes with the Social Security Administration involving overpayments that are work-related and that are a barrier in securing, maintaining, or regaining employment.
* Advocate for students who are working with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities or are Social Security beneficiaries and need accommodations in their post-secondary programs.
* Advocate for rules, policies and procedures in Ohio’s vocational rehabilitation system that promote full access to all services needed for people with disabilities to pursue work that is tailored to their needs and strengths.
* Assist with issues accessing vocational rehabilitation services or independent living services by providing self-advocacy assistance, information, advice, negotiation, and, when appropriate, advocacy within the administrative hearing process.
* Conduct targeted outreach and provide trainings on accessing vocational rehabilitation services through Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities.
* Address blanket denials by Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities through individual advocacy or litigation where services are denied without individual analysis or because of policies that conflict with federal law.

**Protecting people with disabilities in facilities from abuse, neglect, and rights violations.**

* Conduct monitoring activities in state-licensed, segregated facilities regarding rights education and protection, environmental conditions, and level of care/treatment standards to advocate for and protect the rights of individuals with disabilities.
* Advocate for necessary communication, including access to the internet, in state regional psychiatric hospitals for individuals with long-term hospital stays.
* Investigate allegations of abuse and neglect and exploitation in a variety of state-licensed or state-operated segregated settings, particularly in instances where there are allegations of suspicious deaths, serious injury resulting in hospitalization, restraint and seclusion that is frequent and reoccurring or for long periods of time, and sexual abuse and human trafficking.
* Engage in systemic advocacy for access to mental health services and advocate for people in jails and prisons who are experiencing suicidal ideations.
* Advocate for effective communication and access to assistive technology for people in prisons or jails to ask for services or raise concerns, to access medical and mental health services, and to talk safely to an attorney and visitors.

**Ensuring voters with disabilities have equal access to voting systems and the information and resources they need to enforce their rights.**

* Provide information and referrals, short-term assistance, and legal advocacy for voting accessibility issues, including operating a voter hotline on Election Day.
* Outreach to disabled people incarcerated in county jails to assist with exercising their right to vote.
* Engage in policy and legislative advocacy to protect the right to vote for people with disabilities.

**Implementing Social Security representative payee review program.**

* Review at least 249 representative payees in FY 2024, as well as engaging in Quick Reviews and other activities, like assistance in implementing corrective action plans, as needed to implement the representative payee grant.
* Conduct outreach to places where Social Security beneficiaries receive services.
* Make referrals to outside programs as well as other protection and advocacy programs to address problems identified during reviews, including collaborating with DRO’s abuse and neglect team for referrals of abuse or neglect and conditions issues.

**Assisting people with disabilities to advocate for their rights.**

DRO has limited resources and cannot meet all the advocacy needs of people with disabilities and their families across the state. To maximize our ability to assist people with disabilities to advocate for their rights, DRO will provide short-term assistance and limited legal assistance or advice, information and referrals, and/or self-advocacy advice or information and referrals on the following issues:

* Housing discrimination including a landlord’s refusal to provide reasonable accommodations (like service animals, emotional support animals, accessible parking) or to allow reasonable modifications (physical modifications to one’s dwelling) that have a significant impact on one’s ability to use and enjoy their home, do daily tasks, have their needs met, or be integrated in their community.
* Access to services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities that are experiencing barriers becoming eligible for services in the developmental disabilities system and home and community-based waiver programs.
* Access to programs and services of places of public accommodation, as well as government or public buildings and programs including courts and refusals to provide reasonable accommodations in these settings.
* Access to assistive technology, the lack of which causes a significant and negative impact on access to programs, services, housing, home modifications, transportation, Medicaid denials, or medical care.
* Rights within the guardianship process, including denial of legal representation at a probate court hearing, notice of a hearing or the right to attend, or the right to an independent evaluation.
* Provide limited legal advice to persons who need assistance requesting or implementing supported decision-making and other less restrictive alternatives to guardianship.

The level of short-term assistance and advice depends on several factors, including:

* whether there is legal merit (meaning the facts and law support what the individual wants);
* whether the type of issue and the individual’s situation is able to be resolved with short-term assistance; and
* whether DRO has the necessary resources (attorney time, funding grant resources, and restrictions of individual grants, etc.).

There are many types of requests for advice and assistance where DRO does not have the staff resources, funding, or expertise to provide any individualized legal advice or assistance. For those requests, DRO will provide Information and resources which can include plain language fact sheets, general information in multiple formats, or referrals to other agencies or resources. Generally, this will include requests in the following areas, though this is not a complete list:

* Eligibility for Social Security disability insurance or Supplemental Security Income benefits.
* Veterans benefits.
* Victims of crime services.
* Other abuse, neglect or financial exploitation by a service provider or guardian, not covered above.
* Parental or custody issues.
* Evictions or general landlord-tenant issues, housing conditions.
* Housing discrimination where a request for reasonable accommodation has not yet been made, or where only general information on reasonable accommodations is needed.
* Complaints about one’s current attorney.
* Complaints about medical professionals or other licensed professionals
* Criminal or forensic matters.
* Nursing facility discharge issues or complaints.
* Employment discrimination where the employee has already been terminated.
* Other prisons or jails issues not covered in our annual goals, including where a person incarcerated in a prison has concerns about general medical care, insufficient mental health care or treatment, or ineffective communication.
* Complaints or questions from people in mental health facilities, including those involving voluntary or involuntary admissions to psychiatric hospitals.
* Denials of Waiver services issues such as number of service hours, or denial of specific waiver services.
* Post-secondary accommodations except where the individual is a social security beneficiary or working with Vocational Rehabilitation services through Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD).

**Taking necessary steps to enforce DRO’s statutory access under federal and state law to facilities, individuals and their records.**

* As the protection and advocacy system for Ohio, DRO has federal and state authority to monitor any facility or service provider in the state providing care or treatment to individuals with disabilities, or to investigate incidents of abuse and neglect of individuals with disabilities. DRO will enforce this access authority when necessary to fulfill its role as Ohio’s protection and advocacy system.

**Conducting outreach and training to people with disabilities, their families and advocates, with a focus on reaching underserved communities and diverse populations.**

* Implement a culturally and linguistically competent communications and outreach plan to accomplish this goal.
* Develop plain language training and informational resourcesincluding webinars, short videos, templates, and FAQs for areas where DRO is unable to provide direct legal assistance.