Disability Law Center's
FY 2027 Focus Areas

October 1, 2026 | **Fiscal Year 2027 (October 1, 2026 – September 30, 2027)**

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Funding
DLC receives funding from government grants, private foundations, and individual contributions. For details about our funding and programs, please visit:

https://www.dlc-ma.org/

What Is DLC?

The Disability Law Center (DLC) is a private nonprofit organization designated as the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) system in Massachusetts and a statewide legal services provider. Because the majority of DLC's funding comes from the federal government and we must devote most of our resources to our Core Functions of monitoring and investigating abuse and neglect in places where people with disabilities live or receive services. The demand for DLC services is high. Limitations on and reductions in DLC's funding impact our staffing and capacity to take on new matters, particularly because of DLC's obligations to existing clients and open legal matters.

Learn more about the P&A system by watching this short video.

DLC has an obligation as the P&A system to increase public understanding of the rights of people with all types of disabilities. DLC does this by helping policymakers understand the rights of people with disabilities and by educating people with disabilities about current laws and other programs, and empowering people to be self-advocates.

The rest of the work we do, such as representing individuals, impact litigation, and systemic advocacy, needs to focus on legal issues that DLC is uniquely situated to address. DLC's core work centers on keeping people with disabilities safe from abuse and neglect and challenging the widespread violations of disability rights laws in a way that will help the largest amount of people possible.

Why Does DLC Need Focus Areas?

DLC sets focus areas to maximize the impact of our small office as we work toward our goal of achieving full equality and justice for people with disabilities. DLC is obligated to use most of its P&A funding to accomplish its Core Functions. Our remaining resources need to be used on targeted systemic issues so that DLC can achieve the greatest positive change with its limited resources. DLC's focus areas are based on input from the community and the systemic issues that we identify through our work.

How Does DLC Set Its Focus Areas?

Throughout the year, DLC asks for input from the community so that we can gather information about major threats to the safety, rights, and independence of people with disabilities. DLC uses this information, along with the observations and expertise we gain through our work, to develop a plan that focuses DLC's work on its Core Functions as well as the problem areas that are identified based on input from the community. DLC cannot address every issue, but we try very hard to focus on legal issues that are the most pressing, widespread, or that no other advocacy organization is equipped to handle. Being strategic about how we use DLC's limited funding and staff helps our small office try to make the biggest impact.

The next part of this document is broken out into DLC's Core Functions and DLC's Focus Areas. DLC is obligated to spend most of our resources on our Core Functions. DLC's Focus Areas are the issues we work on with our remaining resources.

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DLC's Commitment to Respect and an Intersectional Approach

DLC is committed to protecting the civil and human rights of ALL persons with disabilities through zealous advocacy and representation. Our work is firmly rooted in the belief that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. The guiding principles for DLC's advocacy are to promote and protect independence, integration, and equal opportunity.

DLC recognizes that the disability justice movement is inseparable from other human rights movements. Because disability intersects with other identities and aspects of a person's life and systems of oppression interlock, DLC is committed to achieve our mission applying an intersectional approach. With this in mind, DLC staff work to make change and provide meaningful assistance while appreciating that each person has unique needs and experiences.

Core Functions

As the P&A for people with disabilities in Massachusetts, DLC must ensure that we devote resources to our Core Functions of empowering persons with disabilities through information, referral, and training, and addressing and preventing abuse and neglect through monitoring activities and investigations.

The terms abuse and neglect are defined by the federal law that creates DLC's access authority. Abuse and neglect happen when an individual or entity (service provider, hospital, group home staff, school administrators, etc.) responsible for a person with a disability puts that person at risk of serious harm or death.

Abuse is an action that is likely to cause physical/emotional harm or death. Some examples of abuse are harassment, assault, sexual assault, excessive or illegal restraint, etc.

Neglect is a failure to provide supports, services, or other assistance. The result is likely to cause physical/emotional harm or death. Some examples of neglect are unsafe conditions in a facility or group home, or not having enough food, clothing, or health care.

Information, Referral, and Training

Access to Information and Referral

DLC does not have enough resources to provide services requested to everyone who contacts us. DLC strives to provide P&A-eligible callers with some level of information and referral (I&R) when their issue falls outside our focus areas and/or we don't have the capacity to handle their matter.

Our work in FY 2027:

- DLC will provide targeted information, self-advocacy assistance, and reliable referrals for people with disabilities on a wide variety of disability-related issues, as DLC capacity permits.
- DLC will develop and maintain online materials for people with disabilities so they can clearly understand their legal issues and the steps they need to take for self-advocacy. DLC will ensure individuals communicating in languages other than English will have access to the same information.
- DLC may provide non-client technical assistance to legal services professionals, independent living center staff, legislative staff, and other professionals working directly with a client with disabilities experiencing a legal issue who call us requesting information and advice on issues impacting people with disabilities.
- DLC will conduct outreach activities to raise public awareness of legal and social issues affecting individuals with disabilities, and to provide information and referral through community engagement.

***Funding: PAIDD, PAIMI, PAIR, PAAT, PATBI, PAVA, PABSS, PABRP, GS, CLAVC**

Training on Disability Rights Issues

DLC provides training on disability rights issues. We offer training to peer, self-advocate, professional, and other groups across the state to build advocacy skills and knowledge of specific areas of law.

DLC will prioritize requests for training and presentations promoting the rights of persons with disabilities on the following issues:

- Human Rights and Disability Rights issues
- Restraint, seclusion and the use of time out rooms in schools
- Obtaining reasonable accommodations in housing, higher education, and employment
- Civic participation and rights to accessible voting
- The impact of working while receiving benefits
- Effective communication in health care and criminal justice settings for people with disabilities
- The role of Representative Payees

Requests for training can be submitted online at https://www.dlc-ma.org/request-a-training/.

Funding: PAIDD, PAIMI, PAIR, PAAT, PATBI, PAVA, PABSS, PABRP, GS, CLAVC

Monitoring for Abuse, Neglect, and Serious Human Rights Violations

Keeping People Safe Through Monitoring

Consistent with our federal mandate, DLC monitors places where people with disabilities live or receive services to prevent, detect, and address instances of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Our primary goal is to ensure that the individual's rights are protected and that they are living or receiving services in a safe environment. We also want to ensure that appropriate services are being provided and that individuals have access to effective communication and opportunities to participate in activities and work that are important to them. Finally, we want to identify people who could live in the community if they had the proper supports and services. In short, we monitor to ensure compliance with respect to legal rights and safety.

DLC gathers information and data that informs our monitoring decisions from a range of sources. When DLC invokes our P&A monitoring authority, federal law places strict limitations on our ability to share information we obtain. What we discover during monitoring visits may warrant follow up advocacy with vendors and state agencies. Monitoring visits may also reveal the need for further investigation of an issue.

Our Work in 2027

- *Subject to capacity*, DLC will monitor places where people with disabilities live or receive services, including but not limited to state-operated and private psychiatric facilities, including hospitals with designated psychiatric units and emergency rooms; Bridgewater State Hospital; intermediate care facilities for individuals with I/DD; Neuromedical/TBI facilities; county correctional facilities; group homes; nursing homes; shelters; day habilitation and other day programs; segregated work environments; and public, private, therapeutic and residential schools serving students with disabilities. **Funding: PAIDD, PAIMI, PAIR, PATBI, GS**
- DLC will monitor schools for compliance with restraint and seclusion regulations and time-out guidance, with a focus on eliminating use of restraints and time-out rooms. **Funding: PAIDD**

Protecting Voting Rights by Monitoring Polling Sites and Facilities

Goal for Systemic Change:
Ensure that all people with disabilities will be able to register to vote, have access to educational materials about elections, and have an equal opportunity to vote throughout the state.

Our Work in 2027

- DLC will survey polling locations to ensure ADA compliance.
- DLC will monitor implementation of accessible electronic voting processes and other provisions of voting reform legislation enacted in 2022.
- DLC will, through monitoring, identify needs for education and training on voting rights.

Target Population: All individuals with disabilities who want to register to vote, participate in the political process, and use their power to vote as well as become better educated about local, statewide, and national elections, with a focus on communities that have been underserved as it pertains to voting rights.

Funding: PAVA

Investigating Abuse, Neglect, and Suspicious Deaths

Abuse, Neglect, and Suspicious Death Investigations

People with disabilities who live or receive services in facilities and group homes are particularly vulnerable to abuse and/or neglect, especially those that cannot report the abuse and neglect themselves. DLC conducts investigations into situations where serious abuse or neglect may have occurred or may still be occurring. An investigation involves a thorough examination of information, records, evidence, and circumstances surrounding the allegation of abuse and neglect. We may also conduct a "secondary investigation" into how the incident was investigated by public authorities.

Because of our limited resources, we focus on investigations where the outcome may be systemic change resulting in a better quality of care for large groups of people with disabilities and incidents that are particularly egregious. When DLC invokes our P&A investigative authority, federal law places limitations on our ability to share information we obtain.

Our Work in 2027

Each year, we investigate as many reports of abuse and neglect **as our resources will allow**. We use the following criteria, among other factors, to determine which reports we will investigate:

- Nature and pervasiveness of the problem, including location and/or the vendor, whether there is a death or serious injury, the extent of any serious human rights violation, what triggered the allegation, how long the problem has persisted, the impact on other people with disabilities in the same or similar environments (whether the problem is indicative of a larger systemic problem), number of complaints received about facility/staff, and whether accepting an issue for investigation presents the opportunity for systems reform.
- Whether this is a primary or secondary investigation, potential policy violations and implications, and the potential relief sought.

Funding: PAIDD, PAIMI, PAIR, PATBI

Investigating and Protecting Beneficiaries from Financial Misuse

DLC is assigned beneficiary reviews by the Social Security Administration (SSA) and is required to engage in statewide site visits to beneficiaries' homes, residential facilities, and state institutions to conduct face-to-face interviews, financial record reviews, and educational visits. The goal of the project is to ensure Representational Payees are performing their payee duties satisfactorily and to protect beneficiaries from financial misuse.

Our Work in 2027

- Schedule, conduct and complete detailed reports on compliance reviews of both organizational and individual representative payees as assigned by SSA under the PABRP program.
- Develop and implement training, outreach, educational materials, and corrective action plans to assist representative payees in conforming to requirements specified by SSA.
- Identify and analyze trends in data from investigations and monitoring activities to determine if they present systemic issues which may be appropriate for DLC to address.
  Where necessary, DLC will make referrals to the appropriate agencies for immediate health/safety threats to the beneficiary, possible financial exploitation by individuals other than the representative payee, or other needs identified by the beneficiary (such as employment related services, occupational skills, etc.).

Target Population
Organizational and individual Representative Payees identified by SSA or DLC for review to ensure SSI/SSDI beneficiaries with Representative Payees are free from financial abuse and neglect.

Funding: PABRP

Focus Areas Outside of DLC's Core Functions

DLC must devote a majority of our work to fulfilling our "Core Function" obligations, as described above. Along with the work DLC does under our Core Function Areas, DLC advocates for the interests of people with all types of disabilities across Massachusetts. To maximize our impact, we focus primarily on systemic reform efforts through advocacy, litigation, and other legal forums. DLC has limited capacity – due to staffing and funding limitations – to provide direct representation to individuals to address legal violations that adversely impact a wide range of individuals with disabilities.

Access to Services for SSA Beneficiaries

Access to Employment Opportunities

Goal for Systemic Change
People with disabilities will have the opportunity to be employed in meaningful, integrated, competitive employment with any reasonable accommodations necessary to do their jobs.

Our Work in 2027

- DLC will provide information for self-advocacy, advice, and referral to Social Security Administration (SSA) beneficiaries (SSI/SSDI) about SSA's work incentives and how earnings impact benefits. **Funding: PABSS**
- DLC will provide advice and self-advocacy assistance or, as resources allow, take a limited number of matters for individual representation, for individuals who are beneficiaries of SSI/SSDI. Such cases may include information or advocacy on behalf of individuals who are experiencing a barrier to work, or a current legal issue involving disability-related discrimination, or a need for reasonable accommodation, if legal advice or advocacy would have the likely effect of reducing the individual's dependance on SSI or SSDI benefits through work. **Funding: PABSS**
    - Examples of areas in which we might do such work include employment, housing, and transportation.

Disability Benefits Project (DBP) Work

Goal for Systemic Change
Ensure proper benefits allocations for low-income Massachusetts residents who have been wrongfully denied federal disability benefits or who have had their benefits unfairly reduced or terminated by the Social Security Administration.

Our Work in 2027

- DLC will provide timely and high-quality technical support and training to DBP funded advocates on issues relating to Social Security Administration (SSA) law and policy changes and federal case law. **Funding: DBP**

- DLC will coordinate and provide training to DBP advocates on Basic Benefits, SSI Financial Eligibility, SSA use of a Pay Distribution Calculator to determine Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA), etc. **Funding: DBP**

Civil Legal Aid for Victims of Crimes (CLAVC)

DLC will focus on the representation of individuals with disabilities who are victims or survivors of crime *when* they experience a disability-related civil legal issue arising from a crime. DLC may only provide representation on civil legal issues. DLC cannot provide criminal defense representation or pursue prosecution of criminal charges.

Our Work in 2027
Based on capacity, DLC will accept cases for information, referral, and/or representation if the civil legal issue is related to the crime the individual has experienced, including employment, housing, Abuse Prevention and Harassment Prevention Orders, access to programs and services of public and private entities (e.g., abuse, neglect, restraint, seclusion).
Funding: CLAVC

Civil Rights

Goal for Systemic Change
People with disabilities have full and equal access to all aspects of society, with a focus on combating discrimination and ensuring appropriate provision of reasonable accommodations and modifications, including communication access, in both public and private settings throughout the Commonwealth.

Our Work in 2027

- **Disability Discrimination:** *Based on resources,* DLC will work to address, systemically and through a limited number of individual cases, discrimination on the basis of disability by:
  - Public entities (e.g., Department of Mental Health, Department of Developmental Services, Department of Public Health, law enforcement, courts, and municipalities). **Funding: PAIR, PAAT, PAIMI, PAIDD, PATBI, GS, PAVA**
    - With certain exceptions, state and local government entities must provide effective communication, reasonable modifications to policies and practices, physically accessible spaces, and an equal opportunity for qualified people with disabilities to participate in and benefit from programs, services, and activities.
  - Private businesses or entities that are generally open to the public, known as public accommodations (e.g., theaters, stores, health care providers, amusement parks, recreational facilities, day care and private educational facilities, etc.). **Funding: PAIR; PAAT, PAIMI, PAIDD, PATBI, GS**
    - With certain exceptions, public accommodations must make reasonable modifications to policies and practices, provide aids and services for effective communication, and remove architectural barriers.
  - Employers that deny reasonable accommodations necessary to maintain employment or have equal access to the hiring process. **Funding: PAIR, PAAT, PAIMI, PAIDD, PATBI, GS**
- **Housing Discrimination:** *DLC does not take eviction cases*. *Resource permitting*, DLC will take housing discrimination cases where individuals with disabilities need reasonable accommodations or modifications. **Funding: PAIR, PAAT, PAIMI, PAIDD, GS, MBF**

- **Voting Access:**
  - DLC will systemically advocate to address issues relating to barriers to voting in polling places and via remote voting programs. **Funding: PAVA, GS**
  - DLC will continue its systemic work with REV UP Mass to ensure access to voting continues to be a priority among disability and other advocacy groups. **Funding: PAVA**
  - DLC will assist people in facilities with voter registration and with exercising their right to vote in local, state, and national elections. **Funding: PAVA**

Health Care

Goal for Systemic Change
People with disabilities have access to the health care services and long term supports and services they need including the accommodations they may need to access those services.

Our Work in 2027
- **Long-Term Supports and Services:** DLC will explore the systemic issues and potential legal and policy solutions relating to the provision of medically necessary in home supports (e.g., continuous skilled nursing and personal care attendant) and durable medical equipment essential to preserving individuals' ability to live independently and participate in their communities. **Funding: PAIR, PAAT**, **PABSS, PAIDD, GS, BBF**
- DLC will collaborate with other disability organizations to systemically address existing barriers that prevent or delay wheelchair repairs and how to eliminate those barriers. **Funding: PAIR, GS, PAAT**
- *Subject to capacity*, DLC will work to address, systemically and through a limited number of individual cases:
  - Denial of medical treatment on the basis of disability. **Funding: PAIR, PAIMI, PAIDD, PATBI**
  - Denial of access to effective communication in health care settings. **Funding: PAIR**

Human Rights

Goal for Systemic Change
People with disabilities know their rights and have access to effective communication with others when their rights are being violated or threatened and are protected from human rights violations in congregate settings.

Our Work in 2027
- DLC will work to systemically address:
  - Complaints of abuse and neglect, serious and systemic violations of human rights of individuals with disabilities where they live or receive services, including instances of improper or excessive restraint, seclusion, or use of force. **Funding: PAIDD, PAIMI, PAIR, PAAT, PATBI**
  - Conditions and systems that impact the ability of people with disabilities to live in the least restrictive and most appropriate environment of their choosing. **Funding: PAIR, PAIMI, PAIDD, PATBI, GS**
  - Failure to provide individuals with disabilities access to effective communication through AT/AAC devices and other auxiliary aids and services that allow individuals to communicate. **Funding: PAIDD, PAIR, PAAT**

- DLC will work in collaboration with self-advocates and disability organizations to join a growing number of states with laws recognizing supported decision-making as an alternative to guardianship. **Funding: GS**

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*Funding Explanations

The majority of DLC's funding is obtained through grants and contracts from the federal government. Approximately 30% of DLC's funding is derived from grants and contracts from the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC). DLC also receives funds from **FY 2023 Budget (Line Item #8900-0001)**, The Boston Bar Foundation, The Boston Foundation, The Massachusetts Bar Foundation, other small grants and stipends, and holds fundraising events and campaigns to supplement its grants and contracts. Below is a listing of the funding DLC uses to operate its programs:

U.S. Health & Human Services

Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (PAIDD)
Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI)
Protection and Advocacy for Traumatic Brain Injury (PATBI)
Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access (PAVA)
Protection and Advocacy for Assistive Technologies (PAAT)

U.S. Department of Education

Protection and Advocacy for Individual Rights (PAIR)

Social Security Administration

Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS)
Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries with Representative Payees (PABRP)

Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC)

General Support Program (GS)
Disability Benefits Project (DBP)
Civil Legal Aid for Victims of Crimes (CLAVC)