

Legal NGO FLAC launches Annual Report **(<https://www.activelink.ie/node/116503>)**



Calls for Urgent Action in response to Ireland's "Legal Aid Crisis"

FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centres) promotes access to justice through its Telephone Information and Referral Line, Free Legal Advice Clinics, casework, targeted legal services (for the Roma, Traveller and LGBTQI+ communities), and policy and law reform work.

Headline figures and casework outcomes for 2024:

- **11,435 queries** were answered by FLAC's **Telephone Information and Referral Line**, including a **record high of 539 domestic violence queries**. The FLAC phoneline **received an estimated 53,103 calls during opening hours** in 2024. FLAC only has the capacity to deal with around 21% of these queries.
 - FLAC often hears from people who are representing themselves in cases before the Workplace Relations Commission in circumstances where their employer or former employer has instructed a solicitor and a junior and senior counsel. FLAC has nowhere to refer these people because the Legal Aid Board cannot provide representation before bodies like the Workplace Relations Commission, as well the Residential Tenancies Board and Social Welfare Appeals Office.
 - **224 people received legal representation**, mainly in the areas of housing/homelessness, equality/discrimination and social welfare law.
 - The High Court ordered a **local authority to provide a Traveller family** with Traveller-specific accommodation after finding that it had **acted unreasonably in withdrawing an offer of a house to the family**.
- Family law remained the area in which FLAC receives the most queries (3,180 queries). Callers to the phoneline frequently reported being unable to access a family law solicitor from the Legal Aid Board's Private Practitioner Panel even though they have been approved for legal aid.
- The phoneline answered 2,341 employment law queries. Queries about grievance procedures, dismissal, bullying or harassment, and discrimination were all higher than in any previous year.
- Volunteer lawyers provided **legal advice to 3,731 people with a 14% increase in employment law queries**
- The High Court **quashed an "unfair" Circuit Court decision** in a Traveller family's discrimination case against a because of "*excessive intervention*" by the Circuit Court Judge.
- A school was ordered to pay €5,000 in compensation to a student with a visual disability after the WRC found that his **exclusion from the Summer Provision Scheme constituted discrimination**.

Eilis Barry, FLAC's Chief Executive, comments:

"The overwhelming demand for FLAC's services point to nothing less than a civil legal aid crisis. As a small NGO, we cannot begin to meet this demand but the ways in which we work provide a blueprint for a new era of civil legal aid in this country.

It is incredibly difficult to achieve change in the area of civil legal aid, due perhaps to a perception that it is about more money for lawyers. This ignores the very high cost of not providing legal aid to children, families and communities, and the growing body of international research that shows unequivocally that investment in legal aid saves States more money than it costs. Civil Legal Aid needs to be treated like the vital public service which it is.

There is now a unique opportunity to respond to Ireland's legal aid crisis. The Civil Legal Aid Review Group has now

reported to the Minister. The 'Migration Pact' requires the State to introduce new forms of public legal assistance for international protection applicants, including early information and advice (both of which should be mainstreamed into all areas of the legal aid system).

We hope that the example FLAC provides will inform the Government's response to the legal aid crisis. This response should include enabling and resourcing the Legal Aid Board to provide legal information and advice to address the huge unmet need for these services. It should also involve enabling the Legal Aid Board to provide representation in employment, discrimination, social welfare and housing cases, and the provision of dedicated and targeted legal services for disadvantaged communities including a properly-resourced national Traveller Legal Service and a national network of community law centres.

Minister for Justice Jim O'Callaghan TD commented:

"FLAC's professionalism and commitment to ensuring access to justice for those of limited means has made them an invaluable partner in the pursuit of a fairer and more equitable legal system."

"There has been a substantial increase in the number of calls being made to FLAC by members of the public, and my Department has endeavoured to meet this increased demand with a 12.6% increase in funding to FLAC in 2025."

"The increase in calls relating to domestic violence, as highlighted in the report, is a stark reminder of the ongoing need for accessible legal information and support. I commend FLAC for their tireless work in supporting vulnerable members of society and reaffirming the Government's commitment to tackling domestic and gender-based violence in all its forms."

Legal Representation & Targeted Legal Services

FLAC's Independent Law Centre Continued to operate € **Traveller Legal Service, LGBTQI Legal Clinic and Roma Legal Clinics. 224 people received legal representation**, mainly in the areas of equality/discrimination (110 clients) housing/homelessness (100 clients) and social welfare (11 clients).

FLAC provided representation in relation to **102 complaints (or potential complaints) under the equality legislation**. Cases under the equality legislation involved alleged discrimination in employment and by shops, hotels, schools, healthcare providers, childcare providers and providers of public transport.

In addition to the outcomes highlighted above:

- **Six Roma people received compensation** pursuant to settlement agreements after making discrimination complaints concerning access to goods and services. This includes a Roma woman who received €4,000 in compensation from Dunnes Stores after she was refused access to the supermarket's off-licence.
- Advocacy from the FLAC legal team led to **successful outcomes in a number of Traveller accommodation cases**:
 - A local authority and the Department of Housing agreed to build a culturally-appropriate Traveller-specific group housing scheme for three Traveller families. FLAC assisted the family in challenging changes to the design of the scheme that would make it indistinguishable from standard housing.
 - A Traveller family (who had been on the housing list for almost a decade) was provided with appropriate temporary accommodation suitable to the needs of their son who uses a wheelchair and who has significant disabilities pending the construction of a specially adapted house to meet their long-term housing needs.
 - A local authority provided social housing to a Traveller woman and her children who had become homeless after fleeing domestic abuse. The Council had previously withdrawn an offer to house the family on the basis that the woman had been convicted of a crime 14 years previously.

Policy & Law Reform

In 2024, FLAC's continued to make law reform recommendations informed by our experience of providing legal assistance:

- FLAC's independent legal analysis of the proposed **Family and Care amendments** made a significant contribution to the debate around the two constitutional referendums in 2024 and was welcomed by many carers and disability rights activists. FLAC highlighted that the proposed Care amendment would not result in practical improvements in the lives of women, paid and unpaid carers, older people, and people with disabilities.
- The Government approved the **General Scheme of a Bill to amend the Equality Acts** FLAC had successfully campaigned for that legislation to be reviewed. The Bill gives effect to many of FLAC's recommendations. It will have a positive impact for Travellers, people with disabilities, and in promoting access to justice. The Bill should be progressed urgently and improved to address gaps in the current draft.
- The Oireachtas Social Protection Committee endorsed FLAC's recommendations for **strengthening and expanding**

the legislation which will give effect to the *O'Meara* decision. FLAC very much welcomes the Bill and the fact that it includes bereaved cohabitants who do not have children. However, we are very concerned about the Bill's proposal to remove entitlement from divorced and separated families to survivor's pensions. The reduction in the social welfare entitlements of a particularly vulnerable category of lone parents and their children (those who were reliant on maintenance from a former partner who has died) is in no way required by the *O'Meara* decision. In fact, the proposed changes may be inconsistent with the equality and children's rights principles which underpin that landmark judgment.

Dr Fiona Donson, FLAC Vice-Chairperson, commented:

"Throughout 2024, FLAC was very fortunate to be able to draw on the deep commitment to access to justice within the legal profession, civil society, law schools and student societies across the island of Ireland. FLAC's work would not be possible without those who volunteer to support the organisation, including the volunteers and law firms working on the phoneline and in clinics, the barristers who assist with casework, and the members of the PILA alliance.

We are also immensely grateful to all of our funders – from Government Departments and statutory bodies to the Law Society, the Bar of Ireland, and philanthropic organisations such as the Community Foundation of Ireland, as well as our wide array of sustaining and supporting partners, individual law firms, practitioners and private individuals - for providing the crucial financial resources that allows FLAC to undertake its work."

Region

Nationwide

FLAC's 2024 Annual Report (https://www.flac.ie/assets/files/pdf/do_something_about_it_flac_annual_report_2024.pdf)

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