

Pro Bono News

Summer Edition Vol. 27 No. 1

News from NYSBA's Pro Bono Services Department

Kristen Wagner, Director of Pro Bono Services



Wagner

NYSBA's Pro Bono Services Department extends its sincere thanks to the legal services and pro bono communities for their continuous efforts in achieving equal access to justice for all

New Yorkers. The community's tireless efforts are commendable and deserve recognition. This edition of the Pro Bono News highlights many achievements, expanding programs, and real world impacts members of the community have accomplished in the past year. NYSBA is proud of all of the newsletter contributors' work, and encourages all New York attorneys to volunteer their time to do pro bono work and assist the community in its fight to achieve access to justice for all.

So far this year...

At its Annual Meeting in January, NYSBA recognized the 2015 Empire State Counsel honorees at the annual Justice for All Luncheon. All NYSBA members who perform 50 or more hours of pro bono service in a year and submit a verification form receive the Empire State Counsel designation. Each year, two individuals are honored as outstanding pro bono volun-

teers and several law firm are honored for their exemplary volunteerism. This year, Judge Fern A. Fisher, deputy chief administrative judge for New York City courts, delivered a memorable keynote address at the Justice for All Luncheon, highlighting the importance of attorneys doing pro bono work and the need to improve access to justice in New York.

In May, the annual President's Pro Bono Service Awards were presented to attorneys from each judicial district in New York State and within special categories of recognition, such as junior lawyer, small/mid-size law firm, large law firm, and law school group, among others. NYSBA was fortunate to welcome Chief Judge Janet DiFiore as a guest speaker at this special event.

Upcoming projects and events...

There is much to look forward to this summer and fall. The Pro Bono Services Department is gearing up for the launch of New York's participation in the ABA Free Legal Answers project. This project will provide an online platform for New York attorneys to provide limited scope legal advice to low-income New Yorkers. All attorneys and low-income individuals who meet the project's eligibility standards may utilize this service in New York. If you are interested in learning more about this new

project and what it means to volunteer, please contact me at kwagner@nysba.org.

Finally, NYSBA's Committee on Legal Aid will sponsor the bi-annual Partnership Conference September 14-16 at the Albany Marriott. Partnership Conference is the premier networking and educational conference for civil legal service providers and pro bono coordinators around the state. This year's Partnership Conference theme is "Justice Rising" – a reflection of the very work emphasized by this edition's articles.

The conference will include more than 30 workshops and the Denison Ray Criminal Defender Awards Dinner, where two staff attorneys, one director and one nonprofit organization will be recognized for their civil legal services to low-income clients. Attendance is expected to exceed 500 people. Conference registrations can be submitted via fax or by mail through August 17th and online at www.nysba.org/partnership2016 through August 31st.

The next call for newsletter article submissions will be for the Winter 2016/2017 edition of the Pro Bono Newsletter, which will highlight Pro Bono Week activities across the state. Articles must be submitted by October 31st in order to be considered for publication. Please submit articles to probono@nysba.org.

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The Pro Bono Newsletter is available online at www.nysba.org/ProBonoNews

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Article authors are responsible for the correctness of all information, citations and quotations. Articles may be edited for clarity and length.

Editor: Kristen Wagner, Esq.

City Bar Justice Center Holds Successful Immigration Law Clinic for Homeless Families

By Lisa Pearlstein, Director of the Legal Clinic for the Homeless at the City Bar Justice Center and Danny Alicea, Fragomen Fellow at the City Bar Justice Center

"You don't need to be afraid of us," said Laura Berger in Spanish to the room filled with homeless families at Nelson Avenue Family residence. "We're here to help you." Most of the households included one or more family members who were undocumented and residing at the shelter.

Berger, a staff attorney from CBJC's Immigrant Women and Children Project, was volunteering at a recent immigration law clinic. These clinics are a partnership between the CBJC's Legal Clinic for the Homeless (LCH) and CBJC's Immigrant Outreach Project, and they provide general immigration legal screenings to one of the most vulnerable and oft forgotten segments of our population: New York City's homeless immigrant population. CBJC's Fragomen Fellow Danny Alicea and LCH's Director Lisa Pearlstein have brought volunteers to four different NYC shelters and found that on average more than 75% of the non-citizen shelter residents qualify for some type of immigration benefit.

Undocumented immigrants are not authorized to work in the United States. Without 'on-the-books' stable employment, it is difficult for homeless undocumented parents to secure affordable stable housing and/or rental assistance to move their families out of the shelter system. The NYC Housing Authority routinely denies applications from undocumented parents because of insufficient income. That is why it is critical to bring lawyers into NYC shelters to identify homeless immigrants who may be eligible for immigration status.

At the most recent homeless shelter immigration clinic, CBJC staff identified several individuals who qualify for immigration relief or needed assistance with a basic application. At least three clients are potentially eligible for

immigration relief because they are victims of domestic violence, human trafficking or a violent crime. Others interviewed arrived in the U.S. before they turned 16 or are the parents of citizen children; they may be eligible for administrative relief in the not too distant future.

CBJC's Fragomen Fellow Danny Alicea and LCH's Director Lisa Pearlstein have brought volunteers to four different NYC shelters and found that on average more than 75% of the non-citizen shelter residents qualify for some type of immigration benefit.

"In the past few months, I have referred dozens of homeless shelter residents to our immigration units, either for intakes or general screenings," said Lisa Pearlstein, Director of the Legal Clinic for the Homeless, who runs monthly pro bono legal clinics in shelters in Manhattan and the Bronx. "We are one of the only legal services providers in New York that actually visits a number of shelters monthly to meet the clients and identify their legal needs."

Pearlstein's project represents homeless families on public benefit issues and also identifies their other unmet legal needs and refers them to lawyers who can help them. The Immigrant Outreach Project seeks to provide immigration assistance to communities that are often left out of mainstream legal services. Adding homeless shelter clinics to the Project's programming was a natural fit.

Pro Bono Project Collaborates to Serve Long Island DV Victims

By Ellen Krakow, Suffolk County Pro Bono Project Coordinator

Soon after being released from the hospital, after another attack by her husband, “Jen” called Nassau/Suffolk Law Service’s (NSLS) Suffolk County Pro Bono Project. Jen was an Asian immigrant and spoke only limited English. Jen’s husband, who had been physically abusing her for years, had just served her with divorce papers. She had no place to live, very little income, and no one to help her.

NSLS immediately got to work by first referring Jen to a local domestic violence agency to help her obtain housing, a temporary Order of Protection, and counseling. After expediting its Pro Bono intake, NSLS was able to quickly arrange pro bono divorce counsel for her and an interpreter to facilitate their communications. NSLS also helped Jen obtain assistance from an immigration attorney at Touro Law Center, to ensure her immigration status was not impacted by developments in the divorce proceedings, and to help her submit any necessary filings with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

This kind of team approach is often needed for the domestic violence victims that we encounter. The clients come to NSLS with multiple immediate needs. Some, like Jen, do not yet have Orders of Protection. Others come to the Pro Bono Project through an internal referral from the NSLS Domestic Violence Unit. Thanks to Chief Judge Lippman’s Civil Legal Services funding, the NSLS DV Unit is able to represent DV victims in Family Court in order to obtain Orders of Protection and, in some instances, child custody and support orders as well. With those orders in place, if the client wishes to then file for divorce, or if their spouse has already filed for divorce, the NSLS Pro Bono Project will immediately step in to arrange for pro bono divorce counsel. The DV Unit attorney is often able to pass on critical information to the Pro Bono Unit that allows it to assess the com-

plexity of the divorce and then find an attorney with the necessary level of experience to take the case.

“Irene” was a client referred to the Pro Bono Project by the NSLS DV unit. Irene was married to a police officer who for years had violently abused

“The DV client is given priority in our pro bono program. We work quickly to assess their needs and place them with the appropriate attorney. Most are matched with attorneys in just a matter of days.”

her. The DV Unit helped her obtain an Order of Protection following his most recent attack. She had a very modest income and four children to support. Her husband, who had substantial income and assets, was not providing her with any financial support. Irene needed to file for divorce as quickly as possible. Fortunately, the Pro Bono Unit was able to quickly find a veteran attorney to take her case. According to NSLS Director of Communications and Volunteer Services, Maria Dosso, “The DV client is given priority in our pro bono program. We work quickly to assess their needs and place them with the appropriate attorney. Most are matched with attorneys in just a matter of days.”

According to Ms. Dosso, at times our pro bono program is the domestic violence client’s first call for help. Says Ms. Dosso, “Some of these clients have never spoken to a DV advocate. They’re very scared and often don’t know what emergency resources are available to them, such as confidential shelter assistance, counseling for themselves and their children, and advocacy services. We urge such clients to first seek help from a DV service agency in their area, and help them make these connections, in order to ensure the proper safeguards are in place from the outset.”

Some NSLS DV clients find themselves sued by their spouses for divorce in courts outside of Long Island. When this occurs, NSLS utilizes the network of New York pro bono programs to locate legal assistance. In the past few months, NSLS

has worked closely with *Her Justice* in New York City to find help for two Suffolk clients involved in divorce actions in New York City. For both clients, going to court in New York City was extremely difficult. In both instances, *Her Justice*, working in concert with the NSLS Pro Bono Project, was able to immediately prepare answers to the complaint and file motions for a change of venue. Collaboration is key, according to Ms. Dosso, when it comes to assisting DV clients. “In addition to our generous pro bono attorneys, I think that what makes our program so effective are the relationships we’ve developed over the years with the necessary players, such as the judiciary, the advocates in the DV agencies, and our colleagues at pro bono programs in other parts of New York,” says Ms. Dosso.

Although NSLS does not limit its pro bono matrimonial services to victims of domestic violence, it is an important component of the work that we do in both Nassau and Suffolk counties. We could not accomplish this without collaborating with local domestic violence agencies, law schools and statewide pro bono partners.

Pro Bono Partnership Takes the Expressway to Long Island

By Maurice Segall, Director, New York and Fairfield County Program, Pro Bono Partnership

At Pro Bono Partnership our mission is to engage in-house and law firm attorneys to provide free business and transactional legal services to nonprofits in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Having identified a need in the area's nonprofit community, we have actively expanded our presence on Long Island. In the past year the Partnership has hosted information sessions for Long Island attorneys and Long Island nonprofits, and has given several educational seminars for the Long Island legal and nonprofit communities.

There are thousands of nonprofits on Long Island responding to many important issues facing residents. Nonprofits, like any other corporations, regularly need legal advice to understand the complex web of

overlapping state and federal regulations by which they are governed. Since the 2013 passage of the New York Nonprofit Revitalization Act, the Partnership has experienced a significant increase in requests for legal advice from current, former, and new nonprofit clients. A disproportionately small number of Long Island nonprofits sought guidance from the Partnership in implementing the new law, and the Partnership has proactively reached out to the Long Island nonprofit community to help it transition to the new legal framework. This, along with increased demand for services that Long Island nonprofits provide, convinced the Partnership that expansion to Long Island is not only necessary, but integral, to Long Island nonprofits' success.

A sampling of our current Long Island-based nonprofits includes: Mom-mentum, New Ground Inc., Mission Be, Hidden Warriors, Inc., Lymphatic Education and Research Network (LE&RN), Be The Best Sport, Inc., Therapy Dogs of Long Island, Sustainable Long Island, Roosevelt Rising Stars, Interagency Council of Glen Cover, and the Nassau County – Coalition on Domestic Violence (CADV).

Lawyers interested in assisting with this initiative do not have to live or work on Long Island. Our staff attorneys and thousands of volunteers are from leading legal departments and law firms and help nonprofits with diverse non-litigation legal matters, which can include corporate governance, nonprofit/tax-exempt law, contracts, real estate, intellectual property, employment law, environmental issues, tax, privacy, and other business-related legal matters.

Our volunteer opportunities are uniquely structured to suit the talents and needs of busy in-house counsel and law firm attorneys:

- Virtually all projects can be done remotely
- Projects are discrete, manageable, and generally not subject to time deadlines
- Every matter is coordinated by a staff attorney experienced in nonprofit law
- We provide model documents, review drafts, and offer other support as needed
- Liability insurance is provided
- Certain projects qualify for NY CLE credit

If you're interested in learning more about our Long Island Expansion, please contact Maurice Segall at 914-328-0674 x323 or msegall@probonopartner.org. For more information on our services, please visit www.probonopartner.org.

NEW YORK STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

Lawyer Referral and Information Service

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Overview of the Program

The New York State Bar Association Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS) has been in existence since 1981. Our service provides referrals to attorneys like you in 44 counties (check our website for a list of the eligible counties). Lawyers who are members of LRIS pay an annual fee of \$75 (\$125 for non-NYSBA members). Proof of malpractice insurance in the minimum amount of \$100,000 is required of all participants. If you are retained by a referred client, you are required to pay LRIS a referral fee of 10% for any case fee of \$500 or more. For additional information, visit www.nysba.org/joinlr.

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Touro Law Center Students Making a Difference in the Community

By Thomas Maligno, Executive Director of the William Randolph Hearst Public Advocacy Center and Director of Pro Bono and Public Service, Touro Law Center

Touro Law Center has launched a new pro bono initiative called Breaking Barriers, the first-ever re-entry program for formerly incarcerated residents in Suffolk County on Long Island. Breaking Barriers is the only program of its kind in the county and provides people with opportunities and knowledge to change their lives. The Breaking Barriers project began, like most initiatives, with a need and an idea in March of 2015. Formerly incarcerated community members in Suffolk County had nowhere to turn for assistance in reentering the workforce and society at large. Pro bono groups and individuals started to take notice of the issue and began brainstorming ideas. The result was to launch Breaking Barriers at Touro Law, a law school known for its commitment to public service and community engagement.

Breaking Barriers is organized and maintained by two law students: Dana Mangiacapra and Michael Papsen. Both students started the project in the spring of 2015 after attending a speech about the need to help reform lives. They spent the spring getting the project off the ground, the summer learning from attorneys and working with clients, and are now recruiting fellow students to their cause Breaking Barriers, ensuring that it lives on after they graduate. In fact, a student in the Veterans' and Service Members' Rights Clinic at Touro Law is helping to expand their work to assist veterans who may be in need of such services. Word is spreading, work is continuing, and lives are being repaired. If not for these students – their hard work and dedication to making Breaking Barriers a reality and their collaboration with current members of the bar – these people in need would likely have nowhere else to turn, no one else to help them.

Dana and Michael are true examples of students making a significant

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contribution to an underserved population through pro bono work.

The Breaking Barriers Project helps formerly incarcerated individuals in a number of ways. Michael and Dana are working with Suffolk County Legal Aid attorney and Touro Law Center alumna Elizabeth Justesen '06, as well as the Suffolk County Executive's Office, to obtain Certificates of Relief of Disability and Certificates of Good Conduct from the State of New York and the courts. These certificates convey that an individual has been rehabilitated and should no longer have their convictions held against them. Furthermore, these certificates allow individuals to apply for the one-hundred plus licenses that they were previously barred from receiving. In other words, these certificates provide individuals with prior convictions a second chance.

How does one begin the process of obtaining a Certificate of Good Conduct or Certificate of Relief from Disabilities? The volunteer-client relationship begins when a client contacts one of the Breaking Barriers volunteers directly, either by phone or by email. Then, Breaking Barriers helps individuals obtain their RAP sheets to ensure they are clear of any errors. When the RAP sheet is deemed to be error-free, an application is filed and sent to the proper court. Once an application is filed, the client will receive a call from the Probation Department for an inter-

view. Breaking Barriers teaches clients with interviewing skills through mock interviews, which will also help with probation and future employers.

Although still in the early stages, it is evident that Breaking Barriers works. Currently, five additional Touro Law students have joined the efforts and are actively working on the project. In the first few months of operation, nearly one-hundred clients have started the process of obtaining certificates. In fact, Breaking Barriers provides opportunities for those with prior convictions to not only obtain certain licenses, but to give back to their community as well. One Breaking Barriers client, who was assisted with obtaining a Certificate of Good Conduct, is giving up a well-paying job working in HVAC in order to earn his license in social work. When asked about his decision, the client stated that although he would probably make less money, the opportunity to work with at-risk children and try to keep them from making the same mistakes he made was well worth the pay cut. These are the individuals Breaking Barriers is helping. These are individuals that law students like Dana, Michael, and other volunteers work hard to assist daily.

Attorney Emeritus Program Helps Serve the Needs of the Community

By Melissa Greenberger Esq., Pro Bono Innovator, Nassau/Suffolk Law Services Committee, Inc. and Donita Krasniqi, AmeriCorps VISTA Member, Attorney Emeritus Program Coordinator, Feerick Center for Social Justice

In September 2014, The Legal Services Corporation (LSC) awarded an 18-month Pro Bono Innovation grant to Legal Assistance of Western New York (LawNY) to recruit volunteer law students and senior attorneys to deliver free legal services to low-income clients. To create the project, LawNY partnered with five other LSC grantees in the state: Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York, Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York, Legal Services of Hudson Valley, Nassau/Suffolk Law Services Committee, Inc. and Neighborhood Legal Services of Buffalo. One goal of this partnership is to support the New York State Attorney Emeritus Program (AEP).

The New York State Unified Court System established the Attorney Emeritus Program to recruit attorneys who are at least 55 years of age, who have at least ten (10) years of practice experience, and who are in good standing, to engage in pro bono work. Through their service, these attorneys help meet the needs of the high numbers of New Yorkers who cannot afford counsel. The six LSC grantees created new positions to manage the grant and hired a part-time attorney to serve as a Pro Bono Innovator. The Innovators in all six agencies have collectively been focused on recruitment and placement of Emeritus volunteers throughout New York State. Over the past 16 months, the grantees have cooperated closely with Fordham Law School's Feerick Center for Social Justice, which provides programmatic and administrative support to the AEP.

Nassau/Suffolk Law Services Committee, Inc. ("NSLS"), one of the participating organizations in this grant, has been very successful at its efforts to recruit and place Emeritus attorneys. Melissa Greenberger, Esq. was hired in January 2015 as the Pro Bono Innovator. She created a questionnaire for potential Emeritus Attorney volun-

teers and began to engage in outreach efforts to recruit new volunteers.

In June 2015, NSLS began a new Self-Help Child Support Project to assist low-income parents in Suffolk County. Four Emeritus attorneys were recruited specifically to assist with this project. They received training on NSLS' mission and intake procedures. Additional training on child support was provided by Family Court practitioners, including an Emeritus attorney. The volunteer Emeritus attorneys screened callers for eligibility of services, conducted intake interviews alongside law student volunteers, advised callers on basic child support issues, and provided referrals to other agencies. Three of the Emeritus attorneys staffed an Information Station at the Suffolk County Family Court during the summer.

Other Emeritus attorneys in the Suffolk County office of NSLS serve in various capacities within the Pro Bono Unit. Some of them screen callers for eligibility of services. One Emeritus attorney, who is a retired New York State Supreme Court Justice, serves as a mentor for new pro bono attorneys who are accepting pro bono divorce cases.

In Nassau County, Emeritus attorneys primarily volunteer with the Volunteer Lawyers Project. Volunteer attorneys serve as "Attorney of the Day" in the Landlord-Tenant Part of the District Court. They represent low-income tenants in court on a particular day. Other Emeritus attorneys screen callers for eligibility of services within the Pro Bono Unit.

The challenge in finding a placement for an Emeritus attorney begins with the initial contact. Some attorneys are reluctant to volunteer because they have no experience in poverty law issues. Ms. Greenberger explains to them that they will receive training and support from NSLS, as well as malpractice insurance cover-

age and CLE credit. She also explains that they have transferable skills, such as interviewing and counseling. One Emeritus attorney stated, "I found myself enjoying the challenge of learning a new area of law . . . and counseling clients who were in desperate need of legal help."

A nice benefit of being an Emeritus attorney is the flexibility of scheduling. As one Emeritus attorney said, "[a]s I no longer wish to pursue law full time, the flexible time commitment of the Project permits me to incorporate the pro bono work which I want to do, into my retirement lifestyle."

Some volunteers assist every week, even if for two hours. Other volunteers assist for a full day, or several days each week. Other volunteers assist when their schedule allows for it. Even snowbirds can volunteer!

Recently, a newly recruited Emeritus attorney and a law graduate seeking to fulfill his 50-hour pro bono requirement, were in the office for training. They had the opportunity to shadow a current, experienced Emeritus attorney in the Self-Help Child Support Pro Bono Project. Ms. Greenberger said, "It was so rewarding to observe the experienced attorneys working side-by-side with an eager law graduate as they screened callers for eligibility."

The Attorney Emeritus Program has benefited NSLS through the addition of volunteers, the ability to assist more individuals, and the availability of attorneys who are able to train volunteers. With these added volunteer attorneys, NSLS can continue its mission of "doing what's legally possible to create a just world."

Eligible attorneys who are interested in enrolling in the program may do so by applying online at the following link: https://fmpub1.nycourts.gov/fmi/iwp/cgi?-db=NEWCIV_AEP_ME&-loadframes.

Buffalo Attorneys Say Yes to Free Legal Clinics

By Gayle T. Murphy, Esq., Pro Bono Coordinator, Erie County Bar Association's Volunteer Lawyers Project

The Say Yes Buffalo Legal Clinics launched in January 2015, offering free, limited scope legal assistance to parents and students in the Buffalo Public Schools. This exciting partnership between the Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP), the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS), and Say Yes to Education Buffalo (Say Yes) seeks to alleviate barriers to students' educational success that may be caused by civil legal problems in the family. From January 2015 through May 2015, pro bono attorneys from Hodgson Russ LLP; Phillips Lytle LLP; Harris Beach PLLC; Barclay Damon LLP; and Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman LLP, provided important free limited-scope civil legal assistance to eligible individuals.

The Say Yes legal clinics took a short break during summer 2015, and re-opened for the 2015-2016 school year on October 13, 2015. At that time, attorneys from Gibson, McAskill & Crosby, LLP joined our impressive group of law firm supporters for the 2015/2016 school year. Additionally, a fifth legal clinic was added for our second year. In order to fully serve the BPS families' civil legal needs, the program now operates year-round, with clients being able to access critically important free civil legal assistance in two clinics during the summer months, beginning July 2016. Attorneys from Rupp Baase Pfalzgraf Cunningham LLC are joining our impressive group of law firm supporters to staff a new summer legal clinic.

Say Yes to Education, Inc., a national non-profit foundation committed to dramatically increasing high school and college graduation rates for urban youth, began over twenty-five years ago. Say Yes provides the promise of a college scholarship for all students as well as the academic, health, social and legal support students need to graduate from high school and succeed in post-secondary learning.

Say Yes Buffalo, a chapter of Say Yes to Education, Inc., began rolling

out services to children in the Buffalo Public School District in the 2012-2013 school year. Through the investment of private dollars from local partners, donors, and Say Yes to Education, BPS students and families are now benefiting from comprehensive academic, financial, social/emotional, health services, and legal supports.

Building on the success of the Say Yes Legal Clinics during the initial year of operation, attorneys at Barclay Damon LLP generously adopted our fifth legal clinic, located at the Adult Learning Center. A sixth Buffalo law firm, Gibson, McAskill & Crosby, LLP, joined this impressive group of attorneys and wasted no time in co-

The Say Yes legal clinic volunteer attorneys play a crucial role in reducing barriers to student success by addressing the legal problems in the student's home. These pro bono attorneys make a tremendous difference in the lives of each client who visits the clinics.

In 2013, the Say Yes Buffalo Legal Task Force, led by co-chairs Hon. Hugh B. Scott, U.S. Magistrate Judge, and Robert Elardo, VLP's Managing Attorney/CEO, began meeting to lay the foundation for the legal clinics. The Legal Task Force includes representatives from the judiciary, local law firms, legal services organizations, Bar Associations, SUNY Buffalo Law School, and the Buffalo Public School District.

Sally Curran, Esq., the executive director of the Onondaga County Volunteer Lawyers Project, provided invaluable assistance during our planning phase. Anthony Marshall, Esq., a partner in the Syracuse office of Harris Beach PLLC, and Susan Katzoff, Esq., a partner in the Syracuse office of Barclay Damon LLP, spent countless hours recounting their powerful experiences with the Syracuse Say Yes legal clinics. Tracie Lopardi, Esq., and Robert Heary, Esq., their Buffalo colleagues, generously facilitated our meetings and were instrumental in our planning efforts.

Following two kickoff events in late 2014, hosted by Hon. Hugh B. Scott, the Buffalo legal community wasted no time in adopting the initial four Say Yes legal clinics in two elementary and two secondary schools.

adopting an existing legal clinic.

In order to ensure a positive and meaningful experience for all, VLP and Say Yes staff provided individual training at each of the law firms. This training covered everything the attorneys needed to know about volunteering at their school's legal clinic, including the unique challenges faced by the students in their schools and their families.

The first five months of the Say Yes legal clinics were a success for our clients as well as our volunteer attorneys. Between January 20, 2015 and May 31, 2015, VLP operated 58 Say Yes legal clinics. Fifty-eight attorneys from the five firms volunteered, many volunteering more than once. Our pro bono attorneys handled 96 cases benefiting 338 family members of BPS students. Most of the questions our pro bono attorneys answered involved family law, housing, bankruptcy, consumer, education, employment, wills and estates, immigration and tax issues.

From October 13, 2015 to May 26, 2016, VLP operated 127 Say Yes legal clinics, with 69 attorneys from six firms volunteering. Our pro bono attorneys handled 214 cases during

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Buffalo Attorneys Say Yes to Free Legal Clinics

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this time, benefitting 952 members of the BPS school community. Like our first year of operation, most of the legal questions involved family law, housing, consumer debt, education, employment, wills and estates, immigration and federal income tax issues.

Clients whose legal needs required more than short-term limited scope legal assistance were referred to the BAEC Lawyer Referral Service or the appropriate legal services organization. Social services referrals were also provided to our clients.

“Adopting South Park High School continues the firm’s strong tradition of community involvement,” according to William Brennan, a partner at Phillips Lytle LLP.

Tracie Lopardi, a partner at Harris Beach PLLC, was eager to continue her firm’s involvement with Say Yes legal clinics in Buffalo because “children are instrumental to our future. We want to use our talents and our profession to help children be able to focus on education. We want to make sure they aren’t worried about where they will sleep if their family is evicted, whether their parents are fighting about money, or when their mom will be deported.” One hundred percent of the attorneys in the Buffalo office of Harris Beach PLLC volunteer for the Say Yes legal clinic.

“Participating in the Say Yes Legal Clinics is a unique way for our attorneys to directly help people who need help the most,” said Thomas Gaffney,

a partner at Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman LLP. “It is a meaningful way to give back to our great Buffalo community.” One of the firm’s pro bono attorneys, Benjamin Wisniewski, a 2014 SUNY Buffalo Law School graduate, is experienced with providing limited scope legal assistance. Ben was a student in the Pro Se Civil Litigation Support Practicum during his senior year at SUNY Buffalo Law School.

The Say Yes legal clinic volunteer attorneys play a crucial role in reducing barriers to student success by addressing the legal problems in the student’s home. These pro bono attorneys make a tremendous difference in the lives of each client who visits the clinics. Their listening skills, their problem-solving abilities, and their ability to deliver critical legal advice is invaluable. We are grateful to these attorneys who donate their time and talents four days a week to narrow the access-to-justice gap in Buffalo. Dr. Kriner Cash, BPS Superintendent, is a strong supporter of the Say Yes legal clinics, noting that “the value of having a way to navigate legal issues that stand in the way of personal progress is priceless.”

Talia Rodriguez, VLP’s Say Yes Legal Clinic Coordinator, works tirelessly to ensure the success of the legal clinics. Volunteer paralegals Diane Capicotto and Linda Gromek from Barclay Damon LLP, and Janet Baranska, a paralegal student volunteer, also provided important support for our pro bono attorneys.

Thank you to our valued Say Yes Legal Clinic pro bono attorneys, listed in alphabetical order: Christina Arthurs, Sean Balkin, Lydia Bebe, Jennifer Breckage, William Brennan, Jason Britt, Erin Borek, Allison Bosworth, Craig Bucki, Sharon Buffum, Joanna Chen, Marissa Coheley, Kimberly Colaiacovo, Erin Connare, Jessica Copeland, Ryan Crawford, Kevin Cross, Ryan Cummings, Patrick Curran, Mark Davis, Jillian Deck, Nicholas DeMarco, Elise DeRose, Andrew Devine, Joanna Dickinson, Thomas Digati, Catherine Dines, Emily Dinsmore, James Domagalski, Christina Donovan, Kyle Dukeman, Meghan Dwyer, Rosemary Enright, Joshua Feinstein, Thomas Fennell, Sarah Fenster, Michael Ferdman, Patrick Fitzgerald, Jeffrey Fiut, Amy Flaherty, Abigail Flynn Kozara, Terrance Flynn, Thomas Gaffney, Eric Glynn, Timothy Graber, Rebecca Guerra, Adam Haney, Robert Heary, Patrick Hines, Rebecca Hoffman, Tristen Hujer, Gregory Ivansic, Theodore Joerg, Kevin Kearney, Leslie Kellogg, David Kernan, Karl Kristoff, Timothy Kucinski, Arianna Kwiatkowski, Colleen Lamarre, Chelsea Latta, Craig Leslie, Brendan Lillis, Brendan Little, Tracie Lopardi, Amanda Lowe, Todd Miles, Sarah Miller, Stacey Moar, Oriana Montani, Melissa Morton, Deena Mueller, Frank Muggia, Robert Murray, Matthew Palmieri, Rosa Pizzi, Seth Pullen, Sarah Ranni, Amy Habib Rittling, Matthew Rosno, Matthew Scherer, Richard Scherer Jr., Paul Schulz, Sharon Schwartz, Frank Sciremammano, Marnie Smith, Ryan Sterns, Sarah Tambakuchi, Bradlee Townsend, Jeffrey Weiss, Catherine Wettlaufer, Benjamin White, Ryan White, Peter Wiltenburg, Benjamin Wisniewski, Mengyi Xu, and Arnold Zelman. If we overlooked anyone, we sincerely apologize. Please contact me at gmurphy@ecbavlp.com if you are a Say Yes Legal Clinic volunteer attorney and your name should be included. If you would like to learn more about the Say Yes Legal Clinics in Buffalo, NY please visit our website at www.ecbavlp.com.

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Settlement Rectifies Discrimination on the Basis of Prior Criminal Convictions

By Jared Levine, Attorney, Crowell & Moring LLP

Jared Levine and Harry Cohen of Crowell & Moring LLP, in conjunction with the New York Legal Aid Society's Employment Unit (Legal Aid), in June 2015 settled a two-year litigation on behalf of two workers who had been unlawfully denied employment with the New York City Transit Authority (NYCTA) on the basis of their prior criminal histories. As a result of the settlement, both plaintiffs are now successful full-time employees of NYCTA, and the agency has modified its employment application process to better reflect New York law barring discrimination on the basis of prior criminal convictions.

The Plaintiffs had each been assigned to work as "interns" with NYCTA in January 2012. As part of New York City's Work Experience Program (WEP), the plaintiffs worked for approximately one year, without pay, as "cleaners" in the New York City subway system, as a condition of receiving welfare benefits through New York City's Human Resources Administration. Both plaintiffs were highly successful interns, ultimately

earning recommendations from their supervisors that they be hired for full-time paid employment. However, after applying for the positions and disclosing their criminal conviction histories, the Plaintiffs were summarily denied employment without any opportunity to submit evidence of rehabilitation.

In June 2013, Crowell & Moring and a Legal Aid team (including staff attorney Amy Hong and supervising attorney Karen Cacace) filed an Article 78 Petition against NYCTA in Brooklyn Supreme Court, alleging a pattern and practice of requesting criminal background information in its employment application without requesting evidence of rehabilitation in violation of Article 23-A of the New York Correction Law, the New York State Human Rights Law and the New York City Human Rights Law.

While each of the plaintiffs had a criminal conviction history, neither had been arrested in more than five years. Moreover, both plaintiffs had firmly demonstrated their rehabilitation, attending drug treatment and/

or anger management programs, pursuing educational advancement, and otherwise working to become productive, contributing members of society. Both plaintiffs had proven themselves through their internships to be excellent and committed workers. Nonetheless, after disclosing their criminal histories, the plaintiffs were summarily denied employment without any explanation.

After the Article 78 petition was denied at the trial level, Crowell & Moring and Legal Aid filed an appeal to the Appellate Division, Second Department. While the appeal was pending, the parties were able to negotiate a favorable settlement, under which both plaintiffs were given full-time paid employment with NYCTA. Significantly, as a result of this lawsuit, NYCTA agreed to adopt additional language in its pre-employment letter to prospective applicants. The new language directs applicants to submit evidence of rehabilitation when disclosing prior criminal convictions during the employment application process.

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Foundation Fellow, Patricia L.R. Rodriguez
Law Office of Patricia L.R. Rodriguez,
Schenectady, NY



A Commitment to Representing the Persecuted Pro Bono

By Sophie Feal, Director of the Immigration Program, Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project, Buffalo

While the refugee crisis created by the war in Syria, and covered extensively by the media these days, is quite disturbing, we should not forget that people in other parts of the world also struggle with violations of fundamental human rights, and when they reach the United States often need legal representation to successfully raise asylum and other claims for relief from removal. Studies have consistently shown that access to a competent attorney can dramatically increase the likelihood of prevailing on an asylum application.

Casa, which generously houses refugee-seekers from all over the world who have nowhere else to go.

Shortly after we met the client, Benjamin Dwyer, counsel at Nixon Peabody, who normally litigates commercial and products liability cases and has a keen interest in international matters, agreed to represent the Congolese client, though he had no prior experience in this area of the law. Now, for some four years, Ben has met his client countless times, often working through a translator; and has appeared at least three times in immi-

by the media, brutally violent gangs have a stranglehold on the region and attempt to recruit young men and children into their ranks by threatening them with violence and often death. The gangs also resort to extortion, robbery, rape, torture and execution to intimidate their fellow citizens, while law enforcement appears unwilling or unable to offer protection due to massive government corruption. According to the U.N., in 2014, Honduras had the highest murder rate per capita in the world. Between July 2014 and April 2016, 64,000 Central American children arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border without their parents, according to data from the Executive Office of Immigration Review. Many of these children were fleeing violence in their home countries, and some 40 percent of those children never found a lawyer to help them. In 2014, a 16 year old boy fled Honduras and was apprehended by U.S. immigration authorities when he crossed in from Mexico. The boy was referred to VLP's Immigration Program after having been placed in foster care at Catholic Family Center in Rochester, through a joint project between the two agencies for unaccompanied immigrant youth. In his native country, both the boy and his mother had been abused by his father for years. The father then abandoned the family, and the boy was viciously targeted by the gangs who stalked him, beat him, and ultimately threatened to kill him.

Learning about the crisis on our southern border that arose a couple years ago, when Central American youths were entering the U.S. in massive numbers, Ben requested that VLP refer to him an unaccompanied youth case while he was still handling the Congolese asylum matter. When we discussed with him this Honduran case, he immediately accepted it. Ben stepped in to defend the boy in

Between July 2014 and April 2016, 64,000 Central American children arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border without their parents, according to data from the Executive Office of Immigration Review. Many of these children were fleeing violence in their home countries, and some 40 percent of those children never found a lawyer to help them.

According to Amnesty International, the human rights situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been dire for decades, with abuses committed both by the government and armed rebel groups, and warfare raging in the east of the country. Political activists, among others, are routinely arrested by security forces since the government targets any dissent among its populace despite their stated right to freedom of assembly and expression. VLP has represented many Congolese in the past and their stories are jarring.

In May 2012, VLP's Immigration Program met a Congolese citizen, a university student, who had fled his country after having been imprisoned and violently beaten as an active member of an opposition political party. He had hoped to go to Canada, where one of his native languages, French, is spoken, but was unsuccessful. Instead, he ended up facing removal proceedings in Buffalo and living in a local shelter, VIVE/La

gration court on the client's behalf—twice for half-day trials—with another one scheduled in January 2017. Ben also flew an essential, but indigent, witness to Buffalo from North Carolina at the expense of his generous firm in order for the man to testify in immigration court; recruited a pro bono handwriting expert to testify when the immigration judge questioned the authenticity of letters sent from Africa; and convinced a colleague to handle the translations of vital supporting documents from French to English, including hospital records corroborating his client's need for medical attention after his release from jail. In the end, Ben gathered some 400 pages of supporting documentation for this case, and authored a pre-hearing brief on asylum law for his client's claim.

As if the Congolese case were not challenging enough, Ben turned his sights to another violent region of the world and agreed to take on a second VLP immigration case. In Central America, as well documented

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The Legal Aid Society and Debevoise File Federal Class Action on Behalf of Women Prisoners Sexually Abused by Correction Officers in New York

By Karen Fisher Gutheil, Supervising Attorney, The Legal Aid Society Pro Bono Practice

The Legal Aid Society, along with the law firm Debevoise & Plimpton LLP, recently filed *Jones v. Annucci*, a class action lawsuit in the Southern District of New York on behalf of women prisoners alleging they have been sexually abused in the custody of the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (“DOCCS”). Plaintiffs seek an injunction requiring DOCCS to take necessary steps to prevent women in its custody from being sexually abused by male correction officers.

The lawsuit alleges that a culture of indifference exists within DOCCS women’s facilities that allow sexual abuse by staff against prisoners to flourish. The lawsuit also alleges that, despite awareness of the pervasive problem of staff sexual abuse, DOCCS has failed to protect women in its custody by failing to enact and enforce adequate policies and procedures concerning supervision of officers, the investigation of complaints of sexual abuse made against officers, and the ability to appropriately discipline officers.

Under DOCCS policies, officers are not subject to any greater supervision and are allowed to maintain their job assignments even when they have been the subject of repeated and similar allegations of abuse. Correction officers are not thoroughly searched upon entering the facilities and are able to bring in contraband such as drugs and alcohol, which, the lawsuit alleges, they may use to manipulate and coerce prisoners. Further, the lawsuit alleges that there are no cameras in areas frequently used to commit abuse, and investigations are unprofessional and inadequate. In addition, the complaint states that DOCCS fails to protect women who report sexual abuse from retaliation by correction officers.

The six plaintiffs in *Jones V. Annucci* represent the estimated 2,300 women prisoners in DOCCS custody, all of whom, the law alleges, face a substantial risk of sexual abuse while in DOCCS custody. The last time that women prisoners were included in the Department of Justice statistics on

sexual victimization in prisons, New York state prisoners self-reported the highest rate of staff sexual abuse in the nation.

“Staff sexual abuse is a serious problem in New York’s women’s prisons,” said Veronica Vela, Staff Attorney in The Legal Aid Society’s Prisoners’ Rights Project. “DOCCS claims to have a zero tolerance policy to sexual abuse in its prisons, but as we allege in the Complaint, that policy is zero tolerance in name only. The Department has long known of ways to reduce the risk women face in its prisons but fails to take needed measures to protect the women in its custody. We hope that our case can accomplish what years of individual litigation, arrests of officers and legislative efforts have not.”

Lawyers handling the case for The Legal Aid Society include Justine M. Luongo, Dori Lewis and Veronica Vela. Lawyers handling the case for Debevoise and Plimpton LLP include Amanda Bartlett, Christine Ford and Cindy Unegbu.

A Commitment to Representing the Persecuted Pro Bono

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removal proceedings and to help him apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, accorded to noncitizen kids in foster care who can prove before a state court— as a predicate to immigration relief—that they have been abandoned, abused or neglected by a parent. Ben successfully won his client’s case and had the stressful removal proceedings against him terminated. He has now applied for permanent residence for his client, which will ensure the young man a safe future in

the U.S. Ben has since taken on two more of these unaccompanied minor cases, including one involving a Chinese girl who was put on a plane to New York City by her parents without any proper immigration documents, and no plan for what would happen to her when she landed at JFK Airport.

Additionally, when we learned in the local press that 300 Syrian refugees would be resettled in Buffalo, Ben immediately sent VLP an email with a link to the article, asking whether the

Syrians would need any immigration help.

On behalf of VLP, Ben Dwyer has juggled two compelling claims for protection from persecution and is clearly interested in doing even more. His work is undoubtedly an extraordinary example of pro bono advocacy for the most vulnerable in the world, and VLP is extremely grateful to Ben for his remarkable generosity and commitment to our mission. His dedication is truly admirable.

Brooklyn Woman Framed for Manslaughter by Disgraced NYPD Detective Louis Scarcella Vindicated After Spending 10 Years in Prison

Louis Sartori, Director, Pro Bono Practice, Legal Aid Society, Pro Bono Practice and Emily Lundgren, Pro Bono Administrator, Legal Aid Society, Pro Bono Practice

The Legal Aid Society and Hughes Hubbard & Reed LLP successfully vacated a 1998 wrongful manslaughter conviction against Brooklyn resident Vanessa Gathers. The motion to vacate was brought by the Kings County District Attorney Kenneth Thompson and was joined by counsel from Legal Aid and Hughes Hubbard. Disgraced NYPD Detective Louis Scarcella was the chief investigator on Ms. Gathers' case, and his coerced confession from Ms. Gathers was the only incriminating evidence presented against her at trial. Ms. Gathers spent ten years in prison following her wrongful conviction.

Justice Matthew J. D'Emic granted the motion to vacate her conviction. The decision follows two and a half years of exhaustive legal and investigative efforts by lawyers from The Legal Aid Society and Hughes Hubbard. After an extensive investigation, fueled in large part by the results of a successful FOIL litigation against the NYPD, The Legal Aid Society and Hughes Hubbard arrived at the firm conclusion that Ms. Gathers had no involvement in the 1991 assault on Michael Shaw in his Crown Heights apartment, but rather had been framed by Detective Scarcella. Over several written and oral presentations in 2015, the attorneys made the case for her innocence to Mr. Thompson's Office and the District Attorney himself.

"Today's result represents the culmination of two and a half years of intense work by stellar defense lawyers at our firm and at The Legal Aid Society," said Ted Mayer, Managing Partner of Hughes Hubbard. "But the true hero of the story is our client, Vanessa Gathers. We are grateful to District Attorney Thompson for recognizing the overwhelming evidence of innocence and for taking the decisive action that Vanessa's case deserved."

A woman with no prior criminal convictions and no experience in dealing with the NYPD, Ms. Gathers, who lived around the corner from Michael Shaw was interviewed by Scarcella who put her in the witness category, then abandoned the investigation for five years. In 1997 Scarcella was forced out of Brooklyn Homicide North in 1997 in humiliating fashion. Sent to the 77th Precinct to solve "cold" cases, Scarcella picked his own prior case and then coldly and efficiently set upon Ms. Gathers though there was never any evidence suggesting her involvement. Scarcella interrogated her using now widely controversial accusatory interrogation techniques and extracted a confession from her, thereby miraculously "solving" a cold case in just over a day. No evidence at trial implicated Ms. Gathers in the crime save the confession Scarcella had obtained and he was the chief witness against her at trial. As the lead prosecutor acknowledged in her summation, "this is a confession case. There was no eyewitness. There are no fingerprints. There is no evidence other than the defendant's statement to establish her guilt of these crimes."

Ms. Gathers recanted the coerced confession almost immediately and has done so consistently and steadfastly ever since, including in connection with parole applications where it would have been to her advantage to admit guilt. Legal Aid and Hughes Hubbard identified numerous concerns about the confession, including: (1) lack of physical evidence linking Ms. Gathers to the crime scene; (2) no information that Ms. Gathers possessed actual knowledge of the facts of the crime; (3) significant inaccuracies and a critical omission undermining its reliability; and (4) the confessed conduct would have been so aberrational since she had no history of

violence, no history of drug abuse, and no criminal convictions. Since her release in 2007 after ten years in jail, Ms. Gathers has been a law-abiding and productive member of society, a valued employee, a loving mother and daughter.

The Legal Aid Society and Hughes Hubbard's successful partnership on this case began in the summer of 2013. A few months prior, former District Attorney Charles Hynes had agreed to vacate the murder conviction of David Ranta based in large part on "some questionable conduct" by Scarcella. That decision prompted a slew of complaints from the defense bar and convicted defendants about other questionable Scarcella convictions, and the announcement of a review of 50 other murder convictions Scarcella had worked on. Because of its appellate work, The Legal Aid Society was the last counsel of record in approximately 25 of these cases and the Society began a project to investigate those cases.

Since the summer of 2013, Hughes Hubbard, on a pro bono basis, and The Legal Aid Society have devoted literally thousands of attorney hours to the case, including in FOIL litigation with the NYPD and through a massive reinvestigation of the crime. Ms. Gathers' case now stands as the latest proof that false confessions are really no longer an abstract idea or concept, but a reality. At last count, the National Registry of Exonerations had a tally of 221 exonerations in cases involving false confessions. Today that number rises to 222.

In addition to Mr. Mayer, the Hughes Hubbard team consisted of Marc Weinstein, Lisa Cahill, Alexandra Shookhoff, David Shanies, John Turrettini, Alejo Cabranes, Casey Duffy, Ryan Kim and Brittany Cohen, and paralegal Nikki Garton.

Legal Services of the Hudson Valley's Veterans Unit: Serving Those Who Served Us

By Shara Abraham, Esq.; Alexander Brandes, Esq.; Sabra Janko, Esq.; Dorronda Bordley, VISTA
Legal Services of the Hudson Valley VMFAP Unit Attorneys and Staff

On October 1 2015, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley (LSHV) held a cocktail reception in honor of Senator John Bonacic and Senator William Larkin for their tremendous support of veterans and military families. Spearheading the charge to ensure veteran access to Civil Legal Services, the Senators received standing ovations by a crowd of over 100 guests as they were each presented with the "Champion of America's Heroes" Award. Both Senators gave inspiring remarks praising and challenging the crowd to support those who fought and continue to fight for our country. Senator Larkin, a retired Army Officer himself, spoke about the unique skills attorneys have in assisting veterans with daily life issues that doctors and other professionals cannot provide.

Apart from remarks by the Senators, Veteran's Unit Attorney Shara Abraham introduced one of her clients, Sergeant D. Strauss. Sergeant Strauss shared her experience with LSHV when she and her children were being evicted. Strauss explained how the Veterans Unit assisted her by asserting an argument in court under the Servicemember's Civil Relief Act to stay the eviction and give her time to find new and better housing. Sergeant Strauss' heartfelt story drew a resounding applause and gave the audience a true taste of the real-world assistance that LSHV's Veteran's Unit attorneys provide on a daily basis.

With the support of lawmakers like Senators Bonacic and Larkin, in addition to the courage of clients like Sergeant Strauss, we at the LSHV Veterans and Military Families Advocacy Project (VMFAP) have continued to grow and impact the Hudson Valley community. In May 2015, our unit expanded from one staff attorney to three and gained the capabilities to successfully assist and advise veterans in all seven counties of the Hudson Valley. Since its creation in 2012, the

VMFAP unit has assisted over 400 veterans and 170 veteran and military families. Nevertheless, with at least 100,000 veterans in our jurisdiction, we realize there is still much work to be done. In spite of this, our experience has taught us that serving the veterans' community requires two very important things: understanding military culture and understanding the root of veterans' legal issues.

At the heart of our work in the VMFAP Unit is a concerted effort to understand our client base and the uniqueness of their life experiences. Regardless of the branch in which they served, our veteran clients have

possibility that individuals who have served in the military do not self-identify as veterans. This is particularly true of young veterans and veterans who did not deploy overseas or serve in combat missions.

As attorneys committed to effective advocacy on behalf of our veterans, it is critical to remain cognizant of our veterans' life experiences and the courage it takes to seek assistance. In representing veterans, it is critical that we utilize our military cultural competency to educate members of the bar, including those who are adjudicating our clients' cases, to better understand the sacrifices our veter-

Since its creation in 2012, the VMFAP unit has assisted over 400 veterans and 170 veteran and military families. Nevertheless, with at least 100,000 veterans in our jurisdiction, we realize there is still much work to be done.

been trained to focus on others above self. In addition to being trained to disregard personal feelings and one's own well-being, veterans are trained to complete a mission. This ethos stays with a veteran long after he or she returns home. As a veteran readjusts to civilian life and copes with the absence of a mission, the conscious disregard of self and the void that comes from no longer serving a greater purpose can be crippling.

Compounding these factors are significant psychological barriers. A veteran's military training and service is geared toward being fully mission capable. However, a veteran suffering from PTSD, depression, anxiety, among other psychological ailments, likely will not want to be perceived as being in need of help and thus not being fully mission capable. In addition, there remains the distinct

ans have made and the impact these sacrifices have on veterans. It also is imperative that we employ specific legal protections that are uniquely available to veterans, such as the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act.

Although our veteran population is especially deserving of our thanks and respect, many struggle mightily to transition to civilian life, especially when navigating bureaucratic systems that administer access to their earned benefits. While Legal Services of the Hudson Valley's veteran clients face all the same kinds of legal issues as do our other low-income clients, (landlord-tenant issues, debtor-creditor issues, public benefits issues, etc.), their lives are often substantially more dependent on government institutions, including the VA healthcare sys-

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Legal Services of the Hudson Valley's Veterans Unit: Serving Those Who Served Us

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tem, the VA disability benefits offices, and military branch records correction bureaus. There is no more rewarding work than enabling veterans' access to their earned benefits that, because of administrative and bureaucratic obstacles, they had been unable to access previously.

Part of the reason for our veteran clients' inability to navigate complex bureaucratic systems and other legal processes is because a substantial percentage of that population suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder, traumatic brain injury,

or other psychiatric disabilities. Many are also in substantial debt, including to the VA and other government offices that are able to confiscate even protected assets like disability benefits.

Fortunately, the Hudson Valley has many additional aid organizations, dedicated to assisting veterans with their needs, including the VA, transitional housing providers like Common Ground, and community partner organizations like the Supportive Services for Veterans Families program at WestCOP. Legal Services of the Hudson Valley partners with

all of these organizations to ensure that our veteran clients can access all of the benefits that they need and are eligible for.

Moving forward, our vision is to continue to serve veterans and military families, provide preventative legal education to this growing demographic, and empower service providers to better assist veteran clients through legal workshops. With these goals in mind, we are dedicated to "protecting rights and promoting justice" by serving those who served us.

VLP Honors Award Winning Volunteers

By Gayle T. Murphy, Esq., Pro Bono Coordinator, Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project

On November 20, 2015, the Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) and Legal Services for the Elderly, Disabled, or Disadvantaged of WNY, Inc. (LSED), honored their dedicated volunteers and law firm supporters at an Awards Reception immediately preceding the 8th Annual Champions for Justice Bash. In his opening remarks, Kevin Spitzer, Esq., President of the Bar Association of Erie County and Honorary Chair of the 2015 event, recognized the award winners' significant and meaningful contributions toward making the ideal of access to justice a reality.

The 2015 VLP award winners include:

Attorney of the Morning (Landlord-Tenant) Award:

Gregory Della Posta, Esq., a newly admitted attorney, served as our Attorney of the Morning 31 times and represented clients in 180 eviction cases between January 2015 and July 2015. He was a reliable and valued volunteer, often serving as the back-up attorney when the eviction docket was overwhelming.

Immigration Award:

Lawlor F. Quinlan III, Esq., attended our annual CLE on removal defense in 2014 and immediately han-

dled the deportation case of a long-term permanent resident who had come to the US as a refugee from Vietnam. On short notice, Lawlor handled the second half of an asylum trial, quickly learning a difficult and evolving area of Immigration law. He also assisted in an appellate brief which resulted in a victory for a traumatized client after the Immigration Court found him not eligible for asylum. Lawlor's compassion for the clients, and his commitment to the cases, are extraordinary.

VLP V.I.P. Award:

The Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture, established in 2014, has been essential to the work the Immigration Program does representing indigent victims of past persecution and torture who are seeking asylum. This innovative and invaluable program of Jewish Family Services of Buffalo and Erie County assisted in four cases by locating pro bono physicians and mental health professionals who conduct thorough physical and psychiatric forensic examinations. This award recognizes those who are particularly important to VLP's success and sanity, due to the award winner's long time com-

mitment and willingness to help in ways that few others are willing to do.

Federal Court Award:

Charles S. Carra, Esq., is a well-respected, veteran federal court litigator who was appointed in 2013 to act as the Senior Pro Se Staff Attorney for the WDNY. Chuck was a key player in turning the idea of providing free legal assistance to low income pro se litigants in Federal Court into reality. His commitment to the Pro Se Assistance Program, a walk in limited scope legal assistance program in the WDNY, is a prime reason for the program's success.

Family Court Help Desk Award:

Daniel S. Johnston, Esq., spent 37 years in the New York courts and recently retired as the Chief Deputy Clerk of the Erie County Family Court, a position he held for 27 years. Dan was instrumental in getting the Family Court Help Desk up and running. He has consistently gone above and beyond as a court administrator, always making sure that the needs of the Help Desk were met.

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VLP Honors Award Winning Volunteers

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Law Student Volunteer:

Jason S. Fleischer, a 2L at SUNY Buffalo Law School, learned about volunteering opportunities during Pro Bono Week at the law school. Shortly thereafter, Jason became a regular volunteer at the Attorney of the Morning eviction defense program. He was then accepted as a Summer 2015 intern. Jason stood apart from our many other law student volunteers because of his desire to learn, and his ability to understand and empathize with our vulnerable clients.

Divorce Award:

Marc Shatkin, Esq., has been volunteering for VLP since 1994, handling 29 cases and over 407 hours representing our clients. Marc was the first VLP pro bono attorney to represent a same-sex divorce defendant. He gladly assists clients whose cases are complex. He is a dependable, reliable volunteer who always answers our call for help.

Thomas A. Steffan, Esq., has been a valued VLP volunteer since 1997, spending over 248 hours working on 21 cases. Volunteers like Thomas are the backbone of VLP's mission. Tom shares his expertise in bankruptcy, divorce and QDRO's with our clients. He has quietly and professionally assisted our clients over the years.

Law Firm Commitment:

Barclay Damon LLP, Harris Beach LLP, Hodgson Russ LLP, Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman LLP, and Phillips Lytle LLP all share in this award. This year, these five firms answered the call to help staff the newly created VLP Say Yes Legal Clinics in four Buffalo Public Schools without hesitation. Attorneys from these firms went through training and adopted or co-adopted a legal clinic. Each week the firms sent one or two volunteer attorneys to meet with families of Buffalo Public School Children to help them navigate through important legal questions that affect not only the family, but also the child's performance in school. As Federal

Magistrate Hugh Scott likes to say, these lawyers are helping to remove some of the noise which interferes with a child's ability to learn.

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This easy-to-use guide will help you find the right volunteer pro bono opportunity. You can search by county, subject area, and population served.



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Prisoners' Legal Services of New York Welcomes Two New York Bar Foundation Fellows and Three Summer Interns

By Samantha Howell, Director of Pro Bono and Outreach, Prisoners' Legal Services of New York

Prisoners' Legal Services of New York (PLS) was honored to receive a 2016 grant from the New York Bar Foundation to fund fellow positions with our Immigration Initiative. PLS is presently hosting two summer fellows and will host one in the fall. Created in 2014, the Immigration Initiative provides representation to incarcerated persons who are facing removal proceedings. To date, PLS' immigration staff have accepted over 50 cases, representing clients, in removal and proceedings on applications for Withholding of Removal, Convention Against Torture, Cancellation of Removal and Adjustment of Status, as well as helping people seek early conditional parole for deportation only (ECPDO) and conditional release for deportation only (CPDO). PLS' immigration attorneys are currently based out of PLS' Albany Office and represent clients primarily at the Ulster Immigration Court, but also

at the Immigration Courts at Varick Street and in Batavia, NY, where the federal detention center is located.

NYBF fellow Deokhee Ryu is a first year student at Penn State Law. Prior to law school, Deokhee majored in Hindi and French at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in South Korea. Her experiences in the fields of immigration and public interest include internships with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Seoul International Friendship Organization (SIFO). During her internship at UNHCR, she provided counseling services on the Refugee Status Determination Process for asylum-seekers and refugees. At SIFO, she managed international cooperation projects in the Philippines. Deokhee is a native Korean speaker, is fluent in English, Hindi and Urdu and is proficient in French.

NYBF fellow Daniel Lei is a rising 2L at Albany Law School and a gradu-

ate of the University of Albany, with a B.A. in Economics. Prior to law school, Daniel was an intern at the Albany County District Attorney's Community Justice Outreach Center, where he coordinated programs and resources for community members. Daniel speaks Mandarin with Advanced High Proficiency.

Leslie Polanco is a rising 2L at Rutgers Law School – Newark and a recipient of the Michael Maggio Immigration Fellowship. Leslie will be representing clients in removal proceedings and assisting them in other areas where prison and immigration issues intersect. She will also help clients seek early conditional parole for deportation only (ECPDO) and conditional parole for deportation only (CPDO) where appropriate.

PLS is also pleased to welcome Emmanuel Zamor, who will be working with the Pro Bono Partnership Program, and McKenzie Ross, who will be volunteering in PLS' Albany Office.

Emmanuel is a rising 2L at Albany Law School and a 2010 graduate of the City College of CUNY. Emmanuel has volunteered with the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) at Albany Law School and has provided Haitian Creole translation assistance. Emmanuel will be working with PLS' Pro Bono Partnership Program on a variety of matters, including the new Executive Clemency project.

McKenzie is a junior at Oregon State University, where she is studying English, International Studies and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies. McKenzie is proficient in French and organized a TEDx event at Oregon State. McKenzie will be volunteering in PLS' Albany Office, where she will gain a greater understanding of prisoners' rights litigation. McKenzie plans to attend law school and PLS is pleased to help her pursue her interest in our noble profession.

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O

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O

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O

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Diana Steele, Attorney Emeritus

By Donita Krasniqi, AmeriCorps VISTA Member and Attorney Emeritus Coordinator, Feerick Center for Social Justice, Fordham University

When she retired in 2012, tax attorney Diana Steele knew that she wanted to resume her earlier interest in public interest law and therefore signed up for the Attorney Emeritus Program (AEP). AEP is a state-wide initiative established in 2010 by Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman to address New York State's "justice gap." This Program is designed to engage senior attorneys, retired or active, in court-sponsored pro bono projects or with approved legal services providers in New York State. In this way, the Program aims to enhance the capacity of legal services providers to help New Yorkers with civil legal needs who cannot afford legal counsel. Fordham Law School's Feerick Center for Social Justice provides administrative and programmatic support to the Program. Ms. Steele, one of over 1,200 volunteer attorneys enrolled in the AEP, has been using her extensive skills and legal expertise by volunteering with Sanctuary for Families.

Ms. Steele graduated from New York University Law School with the goal of ultimately practicing in the public interest sector. Consistent with her goal, after graduating from law school, she spent the first ten years of her career working with the Legal Aid Society Criminal Appeals Bureau and with the American Civil Liberties Union Women's Rights Project. After receiving her LL.M. in taxation from NYU Law School, the majority of her career was spent as a tax attorney, spending 16 years at the law firm of Thelen Reid & Priest (initially as an associate and then as partner) and the last 14 years providing tax-consulting services as a director at PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Ms. Steele noted that in the beginning she was a bit at a loss about how to find an appropriate volunteer position, but attending an AEP Information Session enabled her to connect with Feerick Center's AEP

Staff who assisted her in finding a volunteer opportunity based on her interests, availability, and background. Ms. Steele now utilizes her experience to support the litigation efforts at Sanctuary for Families, a legal services provider located in New York City, which advocates for and provides legal help to survivors of domestic violence, sex trafficking, and other related forms of gender violence. At this organization, Ms. Steele conducts legal research and drafts litigation documents and legal memoranda. She considers her experience with Sanctuary for Families "tremendously rewarding because it has enabled me to return to the public interest law that was my original intent in going to law school and, most importantly, I feel as if I am helping Sanctuary's mission and its clients." Working at Sanctuary for Families has enabled Ms. Steele to continue doing what she enjoyed most in her pre-retirement practice as well as learn an area of law that is completely new to her.

Amanda Norejko, director of the Matrimonial/Economic Justice Project at Sanctuary for Families, states that Ms. Steele has been an invaluable resource because of her love for the law, extensive legal experience, her willingness to do research on unusual issues, and her ability to approach clients with sensitivity. According to her, "in just one day of work a week, Diana has had a tremendous impact on our trial advocacy and has helped not only the attorneys involved and the litigants we serve, but also the court system by allowing us to present better written motions and present our trial evidence in a more streamlined fashion."

According to Ms. Steele, "the Attorney Emeritus Program provides a wonderful opportunity for retired lawyers who want to volunteer their time and skills." Her advice to other potential volunteers who are consider-

ing the Attorney Emeritus Program as an option is broken down into several steps. First, know what you want. Second, attend an AEP Information Session since you will be able to hear from current AEP volunteers and obtain a broad overview of the types of volunteering opportunities that are available. Third, find someone who is familiar with the organizations that use volunteers and let that person know what type of work you want to do and what time commitment you can make. Feerick Center AEP staff can provide exactly that type of assistance. Finally, she advises to, "be open to something new; volunteering in retirement can be a great opportunity to learn new substantive areas of the law, to acquire new legal skills, and to meet and work with new and dedicated colleagues."

Attorneys, whether retired or active, can become enrolled in the Attorney Emeritus Program if they are at least 55 years of age, have practiced law for a minimum of 10 years, are in good standing, and are willing to provide 60-hours of pro bono services over a period of 2 years. For more information or to apply online please visit: <https://www.nycourts.gov/attorneys/volunteer/emeritus/rsaa/>.



NYLAG Volunteer Lawyer Program Expands to Staten Island

By Daphne Schlick, Director, Consumer Protection Unit New York Legal Assistance Group

The New York Legal Assistance Group, in partnership with the New York State Courts Access to Justice Program, has recently expanded our Volunteer Lawyer For the Day (VLFD) program to Staten Island Civil Court; the last of the five boroughs to benefit from this initiative. NYLAG already runs VLFD in the Bronx and Queens Civil Courts, and began a pilot project in Staten Island in October 2014. Approximately one year later, in late 2015, NYLAG expanded the Staten

In Staten Island alone we have already assisted in over 500 cases. Overall, since its inception, NYLAG's VLFD program has assisted over 9,000 consumers, and helped defendants avoid making over \$11 million in unnecessary payments.

Island VLFD to cover both consumer credit days in Richmond County Civil Court. The VLFD program was initiated by the New York State Courts Access to Justice Program to address the staggering increase in the Civil Court Consumer Credit docket following the economic downturn. NYLAG, along with other program partners, which have included Appleaseed, the Brooklyn Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project and the New York County Lawyers' Association, operate VLFD programs in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan and Queens.

"The NY State court system is grateful that NYLAG stepped forward to start a VLFD consumer program in Richmond County. NYLAG's presence ensures that consumer defendants are represented, which in turn helps bal-

ance the scales of justice. NYLAG's commitment to providing quality legal services to the needy is evident by its participation in the VLFD program," stated Fern A. Fisher, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for NYC Courts and Director, NYS Courts Access to Justice Program.

VLFD provides limited scope representation to pro se litigants who are being sued for consumer debts. Pro bono attorneys, law school graduates and law students, supervised by an on-site coordinating attorney with expertise in consumer credit law, advise clients of their legal rights, represent clients in Court, negotiate with opposing counsel, and argue before a Judge. Student volunteers gain invaluable courtroom experience, while seasoned attorneys are able to expand their practice areas and help provide access to justice for some of New York's most disadvantaged civil litigants.

When VLFD was launched in 2009, 99% of consumer defendants were unrepresented while 100% of plaintiffs had attorneys. The VLFD program helps to level the playing field, ensuring that both parties approach the case on equal footing. Although the services are limited in scope, the program is invaluable in its ability to help pro se defendants understand their rights in litigation and learn how to assert those rights during the course of the lawsuit.

Most consumer credit cases involve credit card accounts that have been purchased by third party debt buyers for pennies on the dollar. Defendants often do not recognize the account for which they are being sued, either because the debt is owed by someone else, their identity was stolen, or because the account has been sold so many times that defendants do not recognize the name of the plaintiff.

To win these cases, debt buyers employ deplorable tactics, such as improperly serving or failing to

serve defendants so they win cases by default. When the defendant does appear in court, the creditor will postpone trials hoping defendants will fail to show up, file motions that a pro se defendant does not understand, or try to get the defendant to admit to owing the debt. To avoid having to take time off for court appearances, or to maintain their credit score, debtors often enter into unaffordable settlement agreements, without fully understanding the consequences. The problem is so acute (State received more than 20,000 complaints about debt collection practices in 2014,) that in 2015, several new regulations went into effect protecting the rights of consumers unfairly harassed and often defrauded by unscrupulous debt collectors.

We became aware of a particularly acute need for assistance in Staten Island thanks to several projects NYLAG was already running in this borough. These were staffed by foreclosure prevention attorneys on the ground assisting victims with financial hardships, as well as consumer protection attorneys assisting people struggling with debt to become financially stable after a dramatic turn in fortunes following the economic downturn. Unlike some of the other boroughs, clients in Staten Island seemed much more isolated in terms of obtaining legal services, especially defendants with consumer credit actions in Court.

Staten Islanders are coming to Court struggling with credit card debt, medical debt and landlord disputes. But in addition to collectible debt, many consumers we see in Staten Island Civil Court are homeowners facing foreclosure or liens on their homes. These are people who are often older, unemployed or underemployed, or retired or disabled and living on a fixed income.

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From Pro Bono Scholar to Staff Attorney at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley - Lessons Learned

By Leigh Ellis, Esq., Staff Attorney, Public Benefits, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley

Last spring I had the opportunity to participate in New York's Pro Bono Scholars Program. For nine weeks I worked in the Children's Advocacy Unit at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley (LSHV), assisting children who had been denied disability benefits and working on suspension and special education cases. I helped experienced attorneys with case preparation, conducted research, and observed client interviews. Being in the office full-time on a daily basis exposed me to the realities of law practice. The program was helpful in my development as a public interest attorney and led to a position as a staff attorney at LSHV. It helped me develop and refine crucial interpersonal skills that cannot be taught in a traditional classroom setting. But more importantly, my experience in the Pro Bono Scholars Program illuminated how poverty affects individuals and, by extension, the ability of public interest attorneys to provide legal services to disadvantaged persons. By opening my eyes to the obstacles poverty creates in every aspect of a person's life, the Pro Bono Scholars Program was instrumental in preparing me for my future legal career.

To begin, my experience through the Pro Bono Scholars Program at LSHV led to my realization that poverty is multilayered and has the capacity to impact multiple areas of a person's life. As such, a housing issue is not just a housing issue, but often will be connected to issues concerning access to basic human needs like food, health care, social services and education. Accordingly, to better serve individuals in our community, public interest attorneys must be able to identify the interlocking causes and consequences of poverty. This necessitates an awareness of, and exposure to, multiple areas of law, both of which the Pro Bono Scholars Program

provided. This awareness and exposure was a result of the supervision and mentorship I received from the dedicated and incredibly knowledgeable Pace faculty and community of lawyers at LSHV.

In addition to my reconceptualization of poverty as multilayered, my experience in the Pro Bono Scholars Program also led to my realization that poverty introduces a kind of chaos into a person's life. In other words, poverty presents unique obstacles which complicate an individual's ability to engage in everyday activities, such as communicating, remaining organized, and accessing transportation. An example of this is the Lifeline cell phone plan also called the *Obama Phone*. The *Obama Phone* is an invaluable resource to low-income individuals; however, the limited number of minutes often results in a lack of cell service toward the end of the month, which makes communica-

tion difficult. My experience as a Pro Bono Scholar first introduced me to this communication barrier and, as a result, I have become more conscientious of when I contact clients and the length of our conversations to avoid literally wasting their time.

work that an individual must receive, retain, and organize. I experienced the *Paper Pileup* several times as a Pro Bono Scholar, and it wasn't uncommon for me to spend an afternoon sifting through a grocery bag full of medical records, or a shoebox full of years' worth of unopened bills and notices, in an attempt to gain a better understanding of an individual's specific legal issue. These organizational and investigatory skills are not taught in a law school classroom and it was only through my participation in the Pro Bono Scholars Program that I was able to develop and hone these abilities in order to more efficiently serve individuals. While these two points about communication and organization, and the general chaos of poverty may, seem minor, these points are important because a failure to plan for the potential lack of cell service or an inability to assist an individual with reviewing and organizing her docu-

To better serve individuals in our community, public interest attorneys must be able to identify the interlocking causes and consequences of poverty. This necessitates an awareness of, and exposure to, multiple areas of law.

tion difficult. My experience as a Pro Bono Scholar first introduced me to this communication barrier and, as a result, I have become more conscientious of when I contact clients and the length of our conversations to avoid literally wasting their time.

Another example that illustrates how the chaos of poverty is specific to organization and is best described as the *Paper Pileup*. The *Paper Pileup* refers to the massive amount of paper-

ments could severely undermine an attorney's ability to advocate.

Finally, one additional lesson learned during my experience in the Pro Bono Scholars Program was that representing some of our community's most vulnerable individuals requires great empathy which must be complemented by healthy emotional armor. Prior to my participation

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Legal Services of the Hudson Valley Pro Bono - A Year in the Life

By Marian Genio, Esq., Pro Bono Director, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley

As I look back on the past year of pro bono activities at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley (LSHV), it is gratifying to see what has been accomplished. Law firms, corporations and individuals have given generously of both their time and resources to assist us in providing quality legal representation to our clients at no cost to them.

The task of assisting pro se clients who are seeking uncontested divorces was undertaken by attorneys from the White Plains office of Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker. Boies, Schiller & Flexner lawyers in their Armonk office continue to represent LSHV clients in administrative hearings before the New York State Department of Labor. In addition, their pro bono role will be extended to include assisting clients at Children's SSI and Section 8 Housing hearings. Manhattan based attorneys from Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler are volunteering at an outreach project at the Yon-

kers housing court. They are Westchester residents who have chosen to help clients from their home county, who otherwise might have to appear pro se. Volunteers from the Purchase office of MasterCard participated in a clinic where they counseled our clients who are dealing with consumer debt issues.

Numerous attorneys from firms throughout our seven-county service area, many solo practitioners, have volunteered to represent clients in need. This past year has brought us a number of law students and recent graduates who have spent time at our offices to fulfill the 50-hour pro bono requirement. Several, having had a positive experience doing so, have continued to volunteer with us. We were fortunate to have two students from Pace Law School who were among the first to participate in the Pro Bono Scholars program, one of whom became a staff attorney in our White Plains office.

One should not think that volunteering at LSHV involves all work and no play. During National Pro Bono Week 2014, we held a reception to honor those attorneys who worked with our clients. To celebrate Law Day 2015, which coincided with the departure of the pro bono scholars, Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman graciously agreed to attend an event at our office. He offered his congratulations to the students for participating in the program and spoke eloquently about the value of pro bono work.

Having the opportunity to meet and work with pro bono attorneys and volunteer interns has been a fulfilling experience. We at LSHV are grateful to those generous volunteers who assist us in our mission of providing free, high quality counsel in civil matters for low-income individuals and families who cannot afford to pay an attorney where basic human needs are at stake.

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to learn about pro bono opportunities.



NYLAG Volunteer Lawyer Program Expands to Staten Island

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According to NYLAG staff attorney Sarah Rosenthal, who serves as a VLFD coordinating attorney in all three boroughs, “The people we work with in Staten Island often had been going along fine, meeting their obligations until something happened – a divorce, job loss or illness – that suddenly puts stress on their ability to keep up with their payments. Opposition attorneys prey on their fear, knowingly misrepresent facts, and press hard for a settlement. Sometimes, all it takes for the plaintiff to back down is having a lawyer there who knows our clients’ rights. But if a settlement is reached, at least we can make sure that it is fair.”

In court, Sarah supervised the work of Walsy Saez, a Fordham Law graduate who chose NYLAG as a partner in order to participate in New York State Courts’ Pro Bono Scholars

Program – another innovative Court program introduced last year by Chief Judge Lippman. Walsy joined NYLAG fresh from taking the bar exam, and began working with our unit on consumer protection matters, including joining Sarah in Staten Island Civil Court.

According to Walsy, VLFD has been an invaluable learning experience: “I have had the chance to advise clients about their options, read body language and unspoken signals that are so important in a courtroom setting, correct opposing counsel when they are out of line, and push for what’s best and fair for the defendant. Most of all, I have seen how even the simplest legal procedure can damage people’s lives – and what a difference a lawyer can make.”

In Staten Island alone we have already assisted in over 500 cases.

Overall, since its inception, NYLAG’s VLFD program has assisted over 9,000 consumers, and helped defendants avoid making over \$11 million in unnecessary payments. These are numbers alone demonstrate the impact this project is having in improving people’s lives.

Thanks to our talented VLFD team, and our partnership with the NYS Courts Access to Justice Program, we have been able to have a positive impact on vulnerable New York families who need our assistance most, and pave the way for better advocacy on behalf of consumer debtors who are so often stigmatized and marginalized.

If you are interested in volunteering for the VLFD program, please contact Daphne Schlick at dschlick@nylag.org and mention this article.

From Pro Bono Scholar to Staff Attorney at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley - Lessons Learned

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in the Pro Bono Scholars Program, I assumed that the law was a be-all and end-all that could “fix” a person’s situation; however, my experience in the program has made clear that, typically, this is not the case. Indeed, I’ve come to recognize that sometimes the best legal outcome is one that allows the individual to survive “for the moment.” For example, we may succeed in keeping a housing client in his or her apartment for another month, or we may ensure that a disabled client receives a small amount of compensation each month just to live. The Pro Bono Scholars Program was instrumental in preparing me for the sometimes discouraging or heart-breaking experiences which public interest attorneys must handle. Again, this is a lesson that I could not learn in a law school classroom and I’m grate-

ful that I had an opportunity to find and strengthen my emotional armor in such a supportive and welcoming environment.

My experience, first as a Pro Bono Scholar and now as a public interest attorney, has illustrated that poverty is multilayered, creates chaos, and requires emotional armor. These lessons were invaluable to my development as a public interest attorney and could not have been taught in a traditional classroom setting. It is my hope that we continue to provide and prioritize programs like the Pro Bono Scholars Program, so that students like myself can jumpstart their career with a better understanding of how poverty impacts and obstructs an individual’s access to justice.

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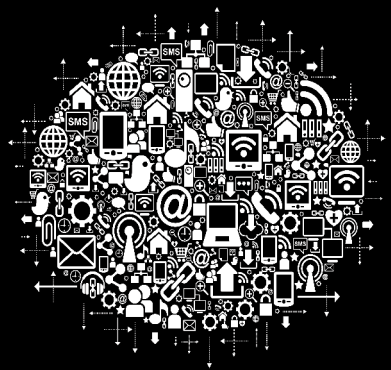
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