

Pro Bono News

Department of Public Interest Message

The New York State Bar Association hosted the 2026 Legal Assistance Partnership Conference from September 23 – 24 at the Capital Center in Albany, New York. More than five hundred program directors, attorneys, pro bono coordinators, and other civil legal service professionals gathered to attend the conference.

This year's conference theme was "Strength and Resilience: Advancing Justice in Challenging Times" and it consisted of 25 CLE programs.

We would like to extend sincere thanks to this year's Partnership Conference Steering Committee members and the NYSBA staff who all helped to facilitate a great program.

We also thank our generous sponsors, exhibitors and supporters who helped make this conference event better than in years past.

Thank you to all those that attended, planned, and otherwise contributed time and effort to the 2026 Legal Assistance Partnership Conference!



2026 Partnership Conference Edition

Steering Committee Chair

Hon. Edwina Martin, Public Administrator
of Richmond County

Steering Committee Members

Michaela Rossettie Azemi, Managing
Attorney of Pro Bono Services, Legal Aid
Society of Mid-New York, Inc.

Heidi Dennis, Executive Director, Rural
Law Center of New York

Tanya Douglas, Director, Disability
Advocacy Project Legal Services NYC

Gretchen Gonzalez, Executive Director,
ECBA Volunteer Lawyers Project

Rezwanul Islam, Deputy Executive
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Pat Malone, Legal Director, Scale Justice

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Abja Midha, Executive Director, Volunteers
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Rebecca Antar, Director of Health Law
Unit, The Legal Aid Society

Licha Nyiendo, General Counsel, IOLA
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Amy E. Schwartz-Wallace, Director of
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Keisha Williams, Deputy Director,
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Opening Plenary

This year's Plenary Opening Remarks came from, Edwina Frances Martin, Esq., Richmond County Public Administrator and the New York State Bar Association President, Taa Grays, Esq.

CLE Forging Ahead: Finding Strength and Resilience in These Challenging Times. Presented by Susan Horowitz, Director, Education Law Project, Civil Practice, The Legal Aid Society; Rachel Goldsmith, LCSW-R, Director, Social Work, Civil Practice, The Legal Aid Society; Nurys Leroux LMSW, Social Worker, Education Law Project, Civil Practice, The Legal Aid Society; Carlos Rodarte, Senior Fellow, Contemplative Based Resilience, Garrison Institute.

Program Description: Practicing in 2026 and beyond requires a unique set of skills to address the cascade of additional challenges that our clients face due to enormous cuts to public benefits, high inflation, and inhumane immigration policies. Expertise in the law only takes you so far when the systems are stacked against both us and our clients. New and experienced legal services professionals are feeling the burdens of policies and venues.

In this keynote, the presenters will discuss what makes the systems we work within so challenging and why traditional discussions of self-care fall short. Presenters will also discuss how lived experiences and intersectional identities impact our experiences of this work.



From left to right: NYSBA President Taa Grays, Hon. Edwina Frances Martin, Rachel Goldsmith, Susan Horowitz, Nurys Leroux.



From left to right: Rachel Goldsmith, Susan Horowitz, Nurys Leroux, and Carlos Rodarte.



From left to right: Rachel Goldsmith, Susan Horowitz, Hon. Edwina Martin, Nurys Leroux, and Carlos Rodarte.

2026 Denison Ray Civil Awards and Phil Dailey Award Ceremony

In 2017, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Richardson was appointed to head the newly expanded New York State Unified Court System's Office for Justice Initiatives, tasked with ensuring meaningful access to justice for all New Yorkers in civil,



Hon. Edwina G. Richardson, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge, Office for Justice Initiatives

criminal, and family courts, regardless of income, background, or ability. In service of this mission, the Office for Justice Initiatives administers Help Centers, self-help services, pro bono attorney and other volunteer programs, and many other resources designed to serve unrepresented court users.

Judge Richardson directs several youth and family justice initiatives, including the Unified Court System's Child Welfare Court Improvement Project, emerging adult justice, and the ongoing implementation of the seminal law raising the age of criminal responsibility in New York State. Additionally, she is responsible for programmatic oversight of the Judiciary Civil Legal Services grant and administers the state's more than 300 problem-solving and accountabil-

ity courts, including groundbreaking opioid courts, drug courts/judicial diversion parts, veterans' treatment courts, mental health courts, human trafficking intervention courts, domestic violence courts, integrated domestic violence courts, juvenile treatment courts, community courts, and impaired driving courts.

Judge Richardson also leads the court system's Equal Justice in the Courts Initiative, implementing the recommendations contained in the October 2020 Report from the Special Adviser on Equal Justice examining racial bias in the state court system, as well as the November 2020 recommendations made by the New York State Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts to enhance gender fairness in the state courts. In 2023, the Office of Diversity & Inclusion, the court system's longstanding office

tasked with promoting opportunities for equal employment and ensuring a diverse workforce, was added to the Office for Justice Initiatives.

Judge Richardson was appointed to the Court of Claims in 2017 and remains active on that bench, while also serving in Supreme Court Criminal Term, New York County. Previously, she presided over New York County Supreme Court's

Youth Part, hearing cases of youth charged as adults.

Judge Richardson first joined the court system as a Court Attorney-Referee in Queens County Family Court, after representing clients in New York City Housing Court, Family Court, and Supreme Court. She later became a Family Court Judge in 2003, the Queens County Supervising Family Court Judge in 2008, and a year later, was elevated to Administrative Judge of all New York City Family Courts.

Judge Richardson is a graduate of CUNY Law School, whose motto is "Law in the Service of Human Needs." She also holds a Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the City University of New York Graduate Center and has been an adjunct professor

at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Hofstra Law School.

She maintains active membership and leadership positions in New York bar associations and court committees advancing professional development and system improvement in the delivery and quality of justice services, and lectures nationwide to share New York's access to equal justice practices and protocols with other jurisdictions.

Criteria

Denison Ray Civil Awards

The Awards are named in memory of career legal activist Denison (Denny) Ray, who led legal services programs in New York and other states.

The Civil Legal Services Staff Attorney Awards recognize individual attorneys' extraordinary commitment to:

- The provision of creative, skilled, and zealous representation of low-income clients;
- Collaboration with pro bono volunteer attorneys from the private bar to expand access to justice opportunities for low-income clients; and/or
- Efforts to inspire, mentor, and support colleagues in the delivery of exceptional legal representation to low-income clients.

The Director Award recognizes outstanding leadership at a civil legal services or pro bono program by an executive director or legal director who inspires the kind of extraordinary commitment by staff and service to the community set forth in the above criteria.

The Nonprofit Organization Award recognizes extraordinary commitment to:

- Strengthening access to justice initiatives;
- Delivering or facilitating the provision of civil legal services to low-income and/or disadvantaged clients;
- Increasing the provision of pro bono services; and/or
- Marshaling resources to maximize services to the community.

Phil Dailey Award

Much of the advocacy work in civil legal services and pro bono programs is done by advocates who are not attorneys. The Phil Dailey Award was created on 2016 in memory of Phil Dailey, a Paralegal at Legal Assistance of Western New York in

Geneva, NY, to acknowledge the vital services of non-attorney staff who demonstrate an excellence and dedication to providing equal access to justice.

Selection criteria:

- A non-attorney staff member of a civil legal services or pro bono provider who is recognized for creative, skilled, and zealous representation of low-income clients; and/or
- Collaboration with pro bono volunteer attorneys from the private bar to expand access to justice opportunities for low-income clients; and/or
- Efforts to inspire, mentor, and support colleagues in the delivery of exceptional legal representation to low-income clients.

Awards Committee

Award recipients are selected by a committee consisting of the chairs of the President's Committee on Access to Justice, the Committee on Legal Aid, the Pro Bono Coordinators' Network, and the Director of the NYSBA's Department of Pro Bono Services

2026 Honorees Civil Legal Services Staff Attorneys

Crystal A. Giron, Esq., Senior Staff Attorney Immigration Project



Crystal Giron is a Senior Staff Attorney with Volunteers of Legal Service ("VOLS") Immigration Project where she has dedicated the past five years to advancing justice for immigrant youth through direct representation, mentorship, and community education. She represents clients in a wide range of humanitarian immigration matters, including Special Immigrant for Juvenile Status (SIJS), asylum, petitions for survivors of domestic violence, violent crimes, and

human trafficking, through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), U, and T visas, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and adjustment of status.

In addition to her advocacy on behalf of clients, Crystal has played a pivotal role in expanding access to legal services by mentoring pro bono attorneys. Through hands-on guidance, encouragement, and training at every stage of their cases, she empowers volunteer attorneys to build the confidence and expertise needed to continue representing immigrant clients, multiplying the organization's impact far beyond her own caseload. She also spearheads an annual naturalization clinic in partnership with leading law firms, connecting pro bono attorneys with college students as they complete the final step of their immigration journey and become eligible for U.S. citizenship.

This year, Crystal partnered with colleagues to launch a quarterly immigration training series for New York City international high school teachers and staff. Recognizing that educators are often the first trusted adults that students and families turn to with immigration-related questions, the training provides timely, accurate information on changes in immigration law and equips school personnel with the knowledge and resources to better support immigrant communities.

Before joining VOLS' Immigration Project, Crystal worked on affirmative and defensive asylum cases with New York Law School's Asylum Clinic. She has volunteered in the Mexico-United States border with the organization *Al Otro Lado* to prepare Spanish-speaking asylum-seekers for their credible fear interviews. In 2025, she served as the Co-Chair for the Dominican Bar Association's Immigration Law Committee.

Crystal graduated from SUNY Binghamton University with a B.A. in Political Science and obtained a J.D. from New York Law School. She is licensed to practice law in New York.

Sara McDowell, Esq., Deputy Executive Director for Immigration Programs

Sara McDowell is the Deputy Executive Director for Immigration Programs at the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, Inc., where she oversees programs providing direct immigration legal services and pro bono immigration legal services. Prior to joining the Volunteer Lawyers Project, Sara was in private practice in Syracuse, NY,



Washington, DC and McLean, Virginia. Sara also previously worked for the National Center for Refugee and Immigrant Children at the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants ("USCRI"), in Washington, DC, where she supervised the USCRI legal team and pro bono attorneys around the United States. Sara began her practice of immigration law in 2003 as an Equal Justice Works Fellow with the Pennsylvania Immigrant Resource Center (PIRC) in York, Pennsylvania, where she represented clients in immigration detention. Sara has presented at various conferences, trainings, and events throughout the United States and Mexico on child immigration issues, asylum, special immigrant juvenile status, and visas for victims of crime and trafficking. Sara received her law degree from Villanova University School of Law, and her undergraduate degree from Le Moyne College.

Pro Bono Program Director

Ndukwe Agwu, Esq., Chief Legal Officer & General Counsel, Build Up Justice NYC



Ndukwe Agwu is the Chief Legal Officer & General Counsel of Build Up Justice NYC (BUJNYC), where he provides strategic leadership for the organization's legal services, pro bono initiatives, and program development. Since joining BUJNYC in

2013 and the senior leadership team in 2021, he has helped guide the organization's growth from thirty-seven to more than 110 employees while expanding access to civil legal services across New York City.

Under Ndukwe's leadership, BUJNYC has strengthened and expanded its pro bono program, launched new domestic violence and wills and estates practices, and opened a Queens office to increase access to housing advocacy for tenants facing eviction. He also led the organization's successful accreditation as a New York State CLE provider, enhancing professional development opportunities for staff and pro bono volunteers, and played a key leadership role in BUJNYC's transition from Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A to Build Up Justice NYC, reflecting the organization's evolution into a citywide provider of free civil legal services.

A thoughtful and mission-driven leader, Ndukwe is committed to building organizational capacity, fostering excellence in legal advocacy, and expanding access to justice for low-income New Yorkers.

Legal Services Director

**Karin Anderson Ponzer, Esq. Ph.D.,
Director, Neighbors link Community
Law Practice**

Karin Anderson Ponzer is the Director of Neighbors Link Community Law Practice, where she leads a team of twenty-four attorneys and DOJ accredited representatives in providing free immigration legal services to immigrant New Yorkers throughout the lower Hudson Valley. She has extensive experience and expertise in immigration legal practice, immigration policy advocacy, and not-for-profit legal services management. Her passions are all things removal defense, procedural due process, and expanding access to justice. She earned a J.D. from the University of Baltimore



School of Law and a Ph.D. in Politics and Historical Studies from the New School for Social Research. She is the Chair of the Committee on Immigration Representation of the New York State Bar Association. She is admitted to practice law in the State of New York and the U.S. Court of Appeals, Second Circuit.

Denison Ray Civil Award for Nonprofit Organization

New York Lawyers for the Public Interest



For nearly 50 years, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) have pursued equality and justice for all New Yorkers.

Our communities set our priorities and direct our work. Their goals shape NYLPI's long commitment to health, immigrant, disability, and environmental justice, as well as helping nonprofits thrive. To achieve systemic change, we combine litigation, policy reform, and pro bono partnerships with grassroots organizing and community education. Most important, we make sure that the people most affected by these issues have a direct say in decisions that impact their lives.

Federal chaos and cruelty have focused NYLPI's current work on three goals: (1) protecting New Yorkers targeted by a weaponized federal government; (2) building nonprofit resilience to external threats, enabling organizations to remain focused on strengthening their communities; and (3) driving local and state reforms that make New York a model for justice and opportunity.

Last year, we launched the Nonprofit Resiliency Network in partnership with Lawyers Alliance for New York. This

new hub provides education, advice, and legal support for nonprofits confronting heightened federal threats and attacks. By bringing together pro bono law firms, advocates, and nonprofit leaders, we help organizations protect immigrant clients, safeguard sensitive data, defend their tax-exempt status, and respond effectively to emerging risks. Our goal is to ensure nonprofits are equipped to act – not frozen by fear – as they carry out their mission-driven work.

In other key areas, our staff won a mandamus enforcing New York's landmark climate law, documented escalating human rights abuses in immigration detention, exposed long wait times for riders with disabilities using rideshares, secured the release of immigrant clients through habeas proceedings, and litigated to make New York City's mental health crisis response system safer, more health centered, and community based.

Phil Dailey Award

**Darlene M. Westphal, Senior Paralegal,
Neighborhood Legal Services**



Darlene graduated with honors from Bryant & Stratton College in 2001 with a degree in Paralegal Studies and a 4.0 grade-point-average. She obtained her first career experience with Oak Orchard Legal Services, first as a volunteer, then as an intern, and then as an employee when she was hired immediately upon her graduation. Later, when Oak Orchard merged with Neighborhood Legal Services ("NLS"), Darlene played an integral part in ensuring a smooth transition as Oak Orchard became the NLS Batavia office. Unlike Oak Orchard, NLS is unionized,

and Darlene worked with representatives from the union and NLS management to draft the first employment contract for the NLS Batavia office. Darlene continued to serve on the Contract Negotiating Committee every few years whenever a contract expired and a new contract was therefore necessary. She also served as the Batavia office liaison to the union for several years.

Darlene began her career as a paralegal advocating for victims of domestic violence, often by assisting married victims obtain divorces from their abusers. After 14 years in that role, she transitioned to the NLS Disability Advocacy Project (“DAP”) unit, where she continues to represent disabled clients, whose claims have been wrongfully denied, in federal administrative hearings. Through Darlene’s advocacy, her clients collectively recover hundreds of thousands of dollars in retroactive benefits every year.

The ripple-effects of Darlene’s wisdom and helpfulness can be felt all throughout NLS. She has trained attorneys and paralegals in the DAP unit, offering guidance on how to build and manage cases, the best way to obtain medical records, and how to comply with regulations established by the Legal Services Corporation. Additionally, she regularly aids her Batavia office coworkers in the daily tasks for their cases, even if they work in a different unit.

On top of her case work, Darlene enjoys doing extra things through the office to help the community that comprises her client base. She has coordinated numerous charitable fundraising activities, and she annually takes the lead in the Batavia office holiday gift-giving for disadvantaged families.

Darlene lives in the town of Albion with her husband, Bruce, and their two black cats, Salem and Midnight. In her spare time, Darlene enjoys spending her free time with her children, grandchildren and baking delicious cakes and pies that she shares with her grateful family, friends, and coworkers.



Left to right: Rezwanul Islam, Esq. (Co-Chair, President’s Committee on Access to Justice, Hon. Edwina Frances Martin (Chair, Partnership Steering Committee) Abja Midha, Esq. (Co-Chair, Committee on Legal Aid), Karin Anderson Ponzer, Esq., Ph.D., Gretchen Gonzalez, Esq. (Co-Chair, Committee on Legal Aid), Sara McDowell, Esq., New York State Bar President, Taa Grays, Esq., Ndukwe Agwu, Esq., Crystal A. Giron, Esq., Darlene M. Westphal, Hon. Edwina Richardson, and McGregor Smyth, Esq.

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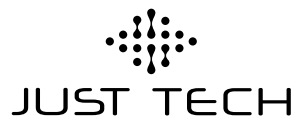
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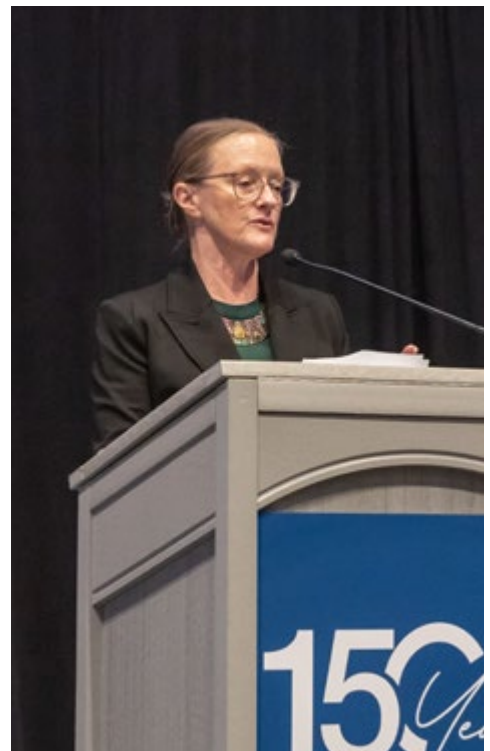
NYSBA
Women in the Law Section



Photo Gallery

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- **Have you worked on or do you know of a special pro bono project?**
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We invite you to submit articles showcasing excellence in pro bono service for upcoming editions of the Pro Bono Newsletter. For more information, go to www.nysba.org/probono.

