Overview of Achievements, 2020-2021

Between April 1, 2020 and March 31, 2021, Neighborhood Legal Services, Inc. (NLS) screened 5,456 cases in the five-county service area. The NLS Buffalo office, serving Erie County, opened 1,930 cases and closed 3,197 cases. Our Niagara Falls office, serving Niagara County, opened 254 cases and closed 350 cases. Our NLS Batavia office, located in Batavia and serving Genesee, Orleans and Wyoming counties, opened 225 cases and closed 351 cases. In total, our three offices opened 2,409 cases and closed 3,898 cases during the reporting period. NLS’ work impacted households containing 8,376 people, which included 3,667 children, 680 victims of domestic violence and 94 veterans.

Due to the efforts of our staff members, $1,975,703 in back benefit awards and $84,019 in monthly benefits were secured for clients during this period. Included in this amount are retroactive awards of Social Security and SSI benefits totaling $1,805,071, and $58,088 in monthly benefits. We also received $126,276 in back child support awards for clients, and produced monthly child support payments of $7,028.

NLS increased access to justice through the initiation or expansion of a variety of programs. NLS has recently developed medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) with local medical providers, and continues to expand this program. These relationships allow NLS to serve clients better in a myriad of ways: through better access to medical records for disability related claims and defenses, more holistic approaches to problem-solving; and through greater access to the services NLS provides for people in need. NLS currently has MLPs with Roswell Comprehensive Care Center, Evergreen-Health, and Catholic Health/Catholic Charities. These MLPs improve clients’ health by resolving health-harming legal needs, and also allow for a multidisciplinary team approach to problem solving.

NLS’ Justice Bus program continued to partner with community-based organizations throughout the five-county service area to operate pop-up clinics to increase client access to legal services. During the pandemic, NLS has conducted a series of virtual clinics as well as ‘know your rights’ events in partnership with local community-based agencies and other civil legal services providers.

Population Served: General Low Income Population
Area Served: 5– County Area in Western New York
Total Funding: $5,696,436
Total IOLA Grant: $1,107,685
Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:
- Total Staff: 75.00
- Lawyers: 30.50
- Paralegals: 28.50
- Others: 16.00
Direct Legal Services
8,376 people benefitted
3,898 legal cases closed

Examples

Health: Kaitlyn is a 19-year-old diagnosed with neurofibromatosis, a rare genetic condition causing her benign brain tumors, hearing loss in her right ear and imbalance issues. She requires continued chemotherapy and may eventually lose hearing in her left ear. Despite these obstacles, Kaitlyn attempted to work and attend college after her graduation from high school. After a two-year wait, she now has a service dog to assist with hearing and balance. She applied for SSI with a goal of receiving vocational services, which were previously denied. The Administrative Law Judge, with the assistance of a vocational expert, determined that the service dog was a reasonable accommodation that precluded competitive employment, and Kaitlyn was approved for SSI. Kaitlyn is now applying for vocational services to attend college and earn a degree in social work, so she can make a difference in the lives of others.

Housing: Chris contacted NLS after his landlord illegally changed the locks on his apartment and disposed of his belongings. Despite asking the police for help, Chris was only allowed a limited amount of time to get back into his home to retrieve some of his medication. NLS filed an emergency order to show cause to allow Chris to immediately reenter his home to recover what little of his property remained. Through NLS’ advocacy, he was able to recover a $1,100 judgment against his landlord for the destruction and disposal of his property.
**Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>People Benefitted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30,942 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>1,636 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>501 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Assistance</td>
<td>28,805 people</td>
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</tbody>
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*Other Legal Related Services: Overview*

NLS has a substantial community legal education, outreach and web presence within the local and state legal services delivery system. Community education is a significant component of our advocacy. From April 1, 2020 through March 31, 2021, NLS delivered 29 community legal education training sessions as either stand-alone seminars, clinics, or as part of a program or conference. There were 1,077 people who attended, including legal services advocates, social workers, housing providers, case managers and clients. These training sessions provided information on work incentives, fair housing and housing discrimination, public benefits and utility issues, landlord and tenant issues, special education, and domestic violence, as well as other topics of interest to individuals impacted by poverty and/or disability. NLS community education materials are posted to the NLS website, www.nls.org, to amplify and standardize legal information and advice routinely delivered through the NLS intake system. In addition, NLS information letters are available on LawHelpNY.

NLS’ community legal education goal is to maximize the benefits to clients through efficient utilization of its limited financial resources. Through the provision of legal information materials and community legal education, our staff assist case managers, social workers, lay advocates and their clients in identifying, referring, solving or preventing legal problems. In this manner, we exponentially increase the number of people within our client community who receive the benefits of our legal expertise.
Know Your Rights Virtual Events

Community education virtual workshops for the public on topics including public health including: Public Benefits & Evictions during Covid-19; Public Benefits & Unemployment Benefits; Family Law; Evictions During Covid-19; and Housing Covid-19 Edition. Approximately 385 individuals benefitted from these events.

Fair Housing Virtual Series

Community education virtual workshops for the public on fair housing topics including: Unsafe Housing Conditions; Withholding Rent; Repair & Deduct; What Happens in Court; and Inspections. Approximately 60 individuals benefitted from these events.
For more than 25 years, NLS, in partnership with the Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP), has staffed the Lawyer/Attorney of the Morning Program (AMP) at Buffalo City Court. This project, also sponsored by Buffalo City Court, continues to provide immediate services to tenants facing eviction in Buffalo City Court. In 2019, NLS expanded the Attorney of the Morning Program to Lackawanna City Court and Niagara Falls City Court. NLS and VLP have agreed that the court will encourage attorneys and landlords involved in public and subsidized tenancies to schedule cases on days that NLS staff is present in the courtroom. NLS’ expertise in public and subsidized housing cases is well recognized in the community, and the court often adjourns cases involving public and subsidized cases, or warranty of habitability claims to allow NLS staff to handle them. NLS also works in partnership with VLP to provide advocacy to clients living with HIV or AIDS under a NYS Department of Health grant. To avoid duplication of effort, NLS and VLP offer representation in different, but complementary, areas of the law through that program.

NLS conducts intake with an onsite advocacy staff at the Family Justice Center, and assists victims of domestic violence needing emergency protective orders. NLS partners with Child and Family Services and the Center for Resolution and Justice on a Crime Victims. Through a grant from the Kresge Foundation, NLS worked closely with Partnership for the Public Good and People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH) on a community education and advocacy campaign focused on addressing health-harming housing conditions within the City of Buffalo. NLS also works closely with the City of Buffalo, its legal services partners, Housing Opportunities Made Equal, and other community advocates to develop an eviction diversion strategy to address the current housing crisis. In partnership with the 8th Judicial District, NLS worked to develop a Hub Court that hears eviction cases throughout Erie County and increases access to justice for tenants facing eviction in our community.

On a monthly basis, NLS advocates provide free legal advice to members of the community at local church in Buffalo. [NB: This program is temporarily suspended due to the pandemic.] NLS also collaborates with the Western New York Law Center (WNYLC) to bring a full array of legal services to the five-county region. NLS staff attorneys work with the staff of the WNYLC to identify plaintiffs, frame issues, gather information and challenge DSS decisions at the administrative level of appeals. The WNYLC relies on this type of information sharing when they bring class action lawsuits as remedies to the problems identified by NLS case handlers. Additionally, NLS has a long history of collaboration with other legal services providers in the region.

NLS continues our collaboration with other local legal services agencies to provide services to the large local immigrant community. Also participating are VLP, WNYLC, Center for Elder Law and Justice and Journey’s End Refugee Services. This project continues to coordinate direct legal services for the refugee resettlement and immigrant populations within Erie County. NLS also works with the Jericho Road Ministries HOPE Center to conduct onsite intake for the low-income immigrant and refugee populations.

NLS has recently developed medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) with local medical providers, and continues to expand this program. These relationships allow NLS to serve clients better in a myriad of ways: through better access to medical records for disability related claims and defenses, more holistic approaches to problem-solving, and through greater access to the services NLS provides for people in need. NLS currently has MLPs with Roswell Comprehensive Care Center, Evergreen Health, and Catholic Health/Catholic Charities. These MLPs improve clients’ health by resolving health-harming legal needs, and also allow for a multidisciplinary team approach to problem solving.
Trainings

NLS provides on-going training and professional development opportunities to staff, volunteers and board members both individually and collectively. Supervising attorneys are responsible for training staff in unit intake practices, case review procedures, and other procedural components of the particular position that is filled. NLS pays for continuing legal education in substantive law and skills development for advocacy staff, as well as computer skills training for secretarial and clerical staff. NLS has free access to Practicing Law Institute’s online CLE trainings, which may be used as a foundation for in-house skills development.

NLS provides our attorney staff with the opportunity to earn all necessary CLE hours. NLS also regularly provides in-house training to staff members. Annually, all staff are required to attend a sexual harassment training. In 2020, staff attended numerous trainings for LegalServer, Microsoft 365 and Microsoft Teams, as well as case handling, lobbying and representation of non-citizens trainings. Individualized training to staff is provided on an as-needed basis. NLS began monthly Diversity & Inclusion trainings in September 2020. Staff attended a substance abuse, mental health and well-being training on December 10, 2020 through PLI. Additionally, staff participated in a two-part writing training on November 13 and 20, 2020, presented by UB Law Professor and NLS Board member, Patrick Long. In 2019 NLS staff began training in Trauma Informed Care, which continued on a bi-weekly basis throughout this reporting period, with an average of 34 people attending per session.

A former NLS executive director currently serves as pro bono litigation counsel for NLS. This pro bono litigation counsel works with supervising attorneys and advocacy staff to help identify impact cases and litigation issues and strategies, and to target program attorney CLE efforts to increase advocacy/litigation capacity to better meet the needs of our clients. This position supports the NLS in-house advocacy training by developing program advocates’ general advocacy and litigation skills. NLS administrative staff have attended trainings on issues including sexual harassment, the Family Medical Leave Act, the Paid Family Leave Act and regularly participate in human resources updates trainings. In March 2021, two of NLS’ supervising attorneys participated in an MIE called, “Strengthen Your Core: A Virtual Training for Supervisors of Legal Work.”

In June 2020, board members participated in a half-day board orientation. The training addressed the legal services provided by NLS, LSC regulations, nonprofit board duties of care and loyalty and budgeting. (NB: It was not possible to do court visit in 2020 due to the pandemic). NLS provides mandatory training to all staff on sexual harassment, cultural bias and competency, harm reduction and trauma informed care.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

NLS continues to provide a contract to VLP to support the delivery of pro bono services in Erie County. In addition to our substantial financial commitment to VLP, our staff provide considerable support to the work of private attorneys involved in delivering pro bono services through the development of written materials. These include advocacy-training materials, substantive law materials in areas of poverty law, training, preparing cases, telephone access and advice, and counseling attorneys about particular areas of poverty and disability law. Our staff members account for these private attorney involvement (PAI) activities in our timekeeping system. The training NLS provides to VLP volunteers who participate in the Attorney of the Morning is an example of the substantial resources we provide to pro bono attorneys within our service area. Each NLS unit provides its unique expertise and support to pro bono attorneys working on behalf of low-income clients. These efforts are in addition to the sub-grant with the VLP. Our Batavia Office refers cases to the private bar in its service area through its pro bono referral process. We also make extensive use of law students, particularly in the Buffalo office, due to the proximity of the University at Buffalo School of Law. NLS uses law students in all of our units for direct client services, research, drafting memos and pleadings, data entry and assisting with project management. We have an established recruitment, training and supervision protocol, which allows for effective on-boarding of student volunteers.

In 2020/21, NLS continued to pilot our Justice Bus Initiative to facilitate provision of legal services to low-income and/or disabled clients who cannot afford a private lawyer for civil legal problems. In February 2021, we trained 15 University at Buffalo law students on NYS eviction law and in public benefits law as part of the Justice Bus program. Through NLS Justice Bus community clinics, which provide on-site legal advice and other services designed to empower low-income families, and address housing and financial insecurity issues in communities of need, we provide assistance to those most challenged when seeking access to services. This project will improve our ability to reach clients who cannot access services due to transportation and/or mobility barriers, while leveraging the support of and developing partnerships with volunteer attorneys and law students.

Pro Bono Statistics

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<tr>
<th>Attorneys:</th>
<th>3 Volunteers</th>
<th>175 Hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law Students:</td>
<td>11 Volunteers</td>
<td>1,352 Hours</td>
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Sources Of Funding

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<td>State Funding</td>
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<td>LSC</td>
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