Overview of Achievements, 2020-2021

- VLP provided high quality civil services during the last contract year as we had during previous years. We transitioned all of our services to operate remotely during the pandemic.

- When DOJ refused to suspend operation of Immigration Courts for detained people even though there was a global pandemic and there were active COVID outbreaks in the Batavia Detention Facility, we “met” with clients remotely and handled their removal hearings by telephone.

- Our target population is low-income people in Western NY. We continued to work with the programs in WNY to provide better coordinated and more cost-effective services to clients.

- Our case work benefited 5,857 people on closed cases. We represented 28 non-profit organizations, and we provided referrals to 3,629 more individuals.

- Our case work secured direct financial benefits of $406,515 (lump) and $14,045 (monthly), while also achieving indirect financial benefits of $275,747 (lump) for our clients. Our work also saved taxpayers an estimated $215,698.

- We provided services in 697 immigration cases and closed 284 of them. IOLA’s support helped us continue to be the largest provider of free immigration law services in NY, outside of NYC.

- Even in the midst of a pandemic, 275 pro bono lawyers worked on 568 cases benefitting 1,104 people and closed 254 cases, helping us leverage services for more clients.

- We collaborated with Say Yes Buffalo to provide 7 virtual Know Your Rights sessions on: Father’s Rights, Public Benefits, Eviction Defense during COVID, Custody and Visitation for Non-parents, Taxpayer Rights, Eviction Defense during COVID update, and Unemployment Insurance Benefits. The sessions have been viewed by thousands of people on our social media outlets, and website.

- We converted our Housing Helpline into an 8 county helpline to advise tenants about stalled court proceedings and their rights during the pandemic. We converted our federal Pro Se Assistance Program to a phone model & still involved experienced litigators giving legal advice.

Population Served: Low Income Population

Area Served: Erie and Genesee County

Total Funding: $4,013,225

Total IOLA Grant: $362,500

Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 57.00
- Lawyers: 32.00
- Paralegals: 21.00
- Other: 4.00
Family: The client came to VLP through our Family Court Remote Help Desk in early February 2021. Her cousin was dying from cancer and leaving behind a 12 year old son. Our client was caring for her cousin and the child during her cousin's illness. Her cousin wanted our client to continue to care for the child. We wanted to move as quickly as possible with as little disruption for the child and give him the security of knowing he could remain in our client's home. VLP helped draft her petition and Order to Show Cause to get into Court as soon as possible despite the four to five month Covid scheduling delays. Her cousin sadly passed the same week of filing. We received a Court date for March 2, 2021. We worked with the AFC prior to our first Court appearance to secure an agreement of joint custody with dad, residential custody to our client, and the ability to make educational and medical decisions. This allowed the child to have no disruptions in his care, and no worry as to where he would live. We put the agreement on the record at the first appearance.

Immigration: VLP staff mentored a volunteer lawyer with no prior immigration experience who helped a young Honduran lesbian woman win her asylum case. Our client fled Honduras after members of her community subjected her to atrocious violence including stoning, rape, and death threats, all due to her sexual orientation. We mentored the volunteer as she put together evidence including a psychological evaluation of the client to confirm her mental health symptoms, an expert witness on conditions in Honduras, and extensive testimony preparation for our client who had never testified in court before. We are even more proud of this win as it was before a judge who denies 98.6% of asylum applications. Our client is now starting her new life in the United States and working to reunite with her young daughter who she has not seen in several years.
Other Services...

Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>33,640 people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>30,244 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>536 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Assistance</td>
<td>2,860 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other Legal Related Services: Overview

Our goals with other legal related services to individuals are to reach large numbers of people that are potential clients and to provide them with enough education to help them determine whether they have a legal issue for which they should seek an individual representation meeting. Our community legal education goal for the entire 2-year contract was to reach 5,000 people. During this year alone, 17,638 people benefitted from our virtual community legal education presentations.

In addition, we continued our effort to help educate the public about immigration issues by continuing to make available our 3 part series of short videos on immigration topics. Each series (Immigration 101, Immigration 102, and Immigration 201) includes 5 short videos to educate the community about immigration law and procedures. These videos were produced with technical assistance from the Rise Collaborative and were released on social media, shown at events, and are available on our website at https://ecbavlp.com/vlp-videos/ These videos were viewed 2,400 times during the year.

Because courts were shut down for a number of months during this contract, there was little people could do pro se. However, our Housing Helpline was able to assist 88 people during this time. Also, our remote Pro Se Assistance Program was relaunched in May 2020 utilizing a phone model and provided advice and counsel to 76 people proceeding Pro Se in Federal Court Civil matters.

Other Legal Related Services: Examples

- To help educate the public on assistance provided in the CARES Act, our Staff Attorney created a fact sheet about stimulus payments and other measures to provide relief during the pandemic. It can be found on our website here: https://ecbavlp.com/litc
- In October of 2020, our Staff Attorney that works on our Micro Entrepreneur Project was invited to speak to a class of low-income entrepreneurs enrolled in the Empire State Assistance Program about legal issues in starting your own business, 15 students attended via zoom.
- Our Director of Immigration presented to the NYS Court Clerks Association training the clerks on how to spot human trafficking situations, 100 people attended.
Impact Cases

Jones v Wolf et al: VLP provided representation to several clients included as class members in Jones v. Wolf, a class action brought by New York Civil Liberties Union and Prisoners Legal Services. The suit was successful in obtaining a TRO wherein immigration detainees over 50 or suffering from serious medical conditions were granted social distancing protection through single celling and PPE.

Buffalo Resilience: VLP represented this group and is assisting them in incorporating and obtaining their 501c3 status. The group consists of community members who joined together to obtain and provide PPE to frontline and essential workers. In the early days of the pandemic they provided more than 10 thousand masks to front line workers.

Patalet v Barr/Fremont v. Barr/Sefatullah v Barr: These cases came out of our NYIFUP program representing detained immigrants in removal proceedings. All three cases went to the U.S. Court of Appeals, 2nd Circuit as appeals from habeas matters in the WDNY and were represented by the same pro bono law firm with which VLP works closely. One of VLP’s Immigration Staff Attorneys worked with the firm on drafting the brief in the Fremont v. Barr case and these cases all have the same legal issue. We brought 3 cases on the same issue because we feared that one or more would be mooted out. In fact, Fremont was mooted out when he lost his appeal on the merits (a case that would have also changed the law if we had won) and was deported. If we win with the remaining cases, it will affect all detained immigrants seeking bond hearings in the 2nd Circuit. Currently, the Immigration Courts require a detained person seeking release to show that they are not a flight risk and not a risk to the community. These cases challenge this requirement based on the argument that putting the burden of proof on the person being detained is unconstitutional. In other contexts, if the government wants to detain someone, the burden is on the government to show why the person is a danger to the community or a flight risk. We have set the impact at 650 since that is the normal capacity of the Federal Detention Facility in Batavia, but the impact will actually be much greater.
**Trainings**

Over the last contract year our staff had 90 attendances at 16 CLE presentations. Additionally, we offered 2 Diversity trainings to all staff members, one on LGBTQ cultural competency and one on racial justice battle fatigue and bias in the wake of the George Floyd murder. We also provided a number of wellness trainings through our Employee Assistance Program. Our management team has weekly zoom check in meetings and we utilized this time early in the contract year to provide trainings on how to manage teams virtually, and introduction to change management to help our leadership team support staff through the many technology improvements we made throughout the year.

Additionally, we started utilizing a committee system in both offices to address some office wide initiatives. One such committee in our Batavia office formed last year to work on onboarding of new staff. They created training schedules for new hires and recorded some webinars on basic information for new hires. In our Buffalo office, staff on our “outreach committee” created a training for the whole staff on how to do outreach. All VLP staff have viewed the training and it was recorded via zoom to be used when onboarding all new staff members. Our Diversity and Inclusion committee has also been very busy in getting training opportunities out to staff members and they also started planning a monthly discussion group where a pre-determined topic is raised through a short article and a podcast and then staff are invited to discuss.

Our Board of Directors created an Ad Hoc committee to work on creating a “Board Member Expectations” document and to update our onboarding materials. The final product was recently approved in a Board meeting and will be used to educate current and future board members on their responsibilities in their role on the VLP Board of Directors.

**Technology**

VLP’s technology focus this past contract year has been upgrading our systems and network to operate in a remote setting. We started with TeamViewer on a limited number of work computers and switched our local Access databases to a web-based version with Airtable. Soon, we saw the need to grow our remote capabilities to all staff and created a Remote Desktop Gateway (RDG). The RDG replaced TeamViewer and allowed everyone a better more secure connection to VLP’s network. We also decided to upgrade our case management system. We signed a contract in May 2020, have been working with Legal Server since then to develop our site. We expect to go live in July.

We also transitioned to Windows 365 which gave us control of our email with Microsoft Exchange. We also moved our local file server to the cloud with Microsoft SharePoint and expanded our remote capability with Windows Virtual Desktop (WVD). Utilizing SharePoint for our file server allows our employees to access their files from any device and has a secure two-step verification built in. WVD allows our staff access to a personalized virtual desktop from any computer via web browser while being secured by Windows Defender.
**Significant Collaborations**

**NYSBA:** VLP collaborated with the New York State Bar Association (NYSBA) to address the influx of UIB cases related to the pandemic. NYSBA created an intake system and then sent VLP any cases that originated in our catchment area. We screened cases, provided advice and were available for full representation.

**Live Well Erie Housing Taskforce:** This taskforce was formed by the Erie County Executive early in the pandemic specifically to address the impending housing crisis. Members of the taskforce included the 5 legal services organizations, staff from Erie County Department of Social Services and other County agencies, staff from the City of Buffalo, and several community based organizations whose focus is homeless prevention. The taskforce created a single point of entry for both eviction defense (provided by the 5 legal services agencies) and for rental arrears assistance. Applications for rental arrears assistance were funneled through the county’s 2-1-1 service, and legal services organizations were provided back end access to the application portal in order to assist their clients in completing their applications.

**Eviction Diversion Workgroup:** This group was started in April of 2020 to bring together stakeholders around the impending eviction crisis arising out of the pandemic. Members of the working group include VLP, NLS, Erie County Department of Social Services, and other community organizations that work with homeless populations. The group has been very effective in sharing information about eviction defense and possible sources of money for rental and utility arrears.

**Executive Director’s bi-weekly meeting:** In April of 2020, we began to have bi-weekly phone calls with the Executive Directors and Deputy Directors of the 5 legal services organizations in Buffalo. These calls were invaluable to make sure that we were all working together to address the issues arising out of the pandemic. It was also extremely helpful to talk through best practices for remote work. Some issues that were addressed in this group include working together to ensure that the county Sheriff’s office was not executing warrants early in the pandemic and working together to get the Attorney General’s office to issue a memo to all law enforcement about landlord self-help and illegal evictions.

**8th Judicial District Access to Justice Coalition:** This Coalition was initiated by the Courts prior to the pandemic to bring together all of the legal services providers in the 8th judicial district to share information and to try to address any gaps in services. Once the pandemic hit, these meetings took on more urgency. We went from quarterly meetings to bi-weekly meetings. The meetings were very helpful in disseminating information about how courts were functioning and provided a very quick venue through which we as legal services providers could bring our client’s concerns to the court.

**Working Group for Housing HUB Courts:** In January of 2021, VLP approached the District Executive for the 8th Judicial District about creating a HUB court to consolidate the landlord tenant parts from all of the Justice Courts in Erie County to one consolidated part housed in Buffalo City Court. We formed a small working group comprised of Court staff, VLP and Neighborhood Legal Services (with whom we share our Attorney of the Morning eviction defense program) and a representative from the landlord’s bar. We are hopeful that the program will launch sometime in 2021.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

Our program is acutely focused on volunteer involvement. Even during the global pandemic, we involved 275 attorneys in pro bono representation of 568 of our clients and benefitting 1,104 people. (254 of these cases were closed) We have a pro bono attorney panel which takes traditional pro bono model referrals for individual clients and small not for profit groups. Other attorneys volunteer with our (newly remote) limited scope projects: the Attorney of the Morning Program (eviction defense at Buffalo City Court and Lackawanna City Court); 3 Family Court Help Desks; Federal Court Pro Se Assistance Program; and Native American Legal Aid Clinic. We screen all clients for eligibility and all cases for merit. We track case progress and look for issues that the attorneys might need help with. We provide training, mentors and technical assistance. We also utilize 4-10 volunteers at any given time as “in-house volunteers”, though in the last year they were remote. Our volunteers include attorneys, law graduates, and law students. They help coordinate our limited scope projects, conduct client intakes, work on case files and represent clients. We worked with the 8th Judicial District Pro Bono Committee (which is Co-Chaired by the Administrative Judge for the 8th Judicial District) and other providers to raise awareness of pro bono and to recruit pro bono attorneys throughout the 8 county district.

Due to the pandemic, we could not host the annual Champions for Justice Bash, a fundraiser celebrating our volunteers and staff. In its place, we did a virtual Champions for Justice Awards Ceremony, wherein we highlighted 19 award winners in a series of videos released every Monday for 9 weeks on our social media accounts. The videos also helped to raise awareness of our services and build good will. In March of 2021 VLP hosted a virtual trivia night where over 130 people competed. We had 4 “mission moments” throughout the night where we showed videos featuring volunteer attorneys, clients, and the impact of VLP’s work. The majority of the over 130 participants were young lawyers from large law firms in Buffalo, many of whom were not previously involved with VLP. We provided 6 virtual CLEs that trained 92 attorneys. All attendees agreed to volunteer with VLP. We also created documents on working with low-income populations and trauma informed care to be given to our volunteers when cases are assigned.

Pro Bono Statistics

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<th>Source</th>
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Sources Of Funding

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