Overview of Achievements, 2020-2021

In the 2020-21 year, The Volunteer Lawyers Project of Onondaga County, Inc. (VLP) conducted 3,120 intakes, resulting in 1,745 closed individual cases, benefiting 4,029 people in civil legal issues affecting the essentials of life, including housing, family, elder and divorce law, and provided legal assistance in 86 group cases, supporting low-income entrepreneurs and nonprofits serving low-income individuals. VLP provided referrals to other legal and social services to 1,269 individuals. Overall, VLP’s panel of over 800 pro bono volunteers provided over 2,900 hours of service.

All of VLP’s services were adapted and are now provided via telephone, video conference, and when necessary, in-person with safety precautions to ensure the safety of our clients, community, and staff during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. VLP’s online intake system – through outreach and education in the community – is a significant tool that simplifies connecting with VLP’s programs. In the past six months, VLP received over 450 applications for assistance online. In previous years, over 70% of intakes took place in person at legal clinics in the community, but this year 99% took place via telephone or online.

Tenants have understandably been confused and upset about their rapidly changing rights during the Covid-19 crisis. VLP presented many programs throughout the pandemic to help bring relevant and up to date information to the community, which reached nearly 16,000 community members. With eviction moratoriums in place, VLP created a telephone-based tenants’ rights counseling program for pro bono attorneys to meet with tenants and advise on how to address urgent housing issues such as landlord harassment, housing code violations, and more. These programs served 465 families, and closed 387 cases benefiting 818 individuals.

The past year also involved constant changes to the immigration system, and VLP’s immigration program worked hard to stay out front of concerns, providing 7 educational sessions that reached over 1,300 community members. The immigration program closed 97 cases, benefiting 283 community members.

VLP’s Family Court Clinic and Surrogate’s Court Clinic, which usually assists unrepresented litigants in-person at the courthouse, both moved to remote assistance with pro bono attorneys. Both were busy addressing urgent concerns regarding COVID-19. These programs served 405 cases.

VLP’s LGBT* Rights program also adapted to telephone and video conferencing services. Despite COVID, the program was able to hold four remote transgender name change clinics with community partners. The program served 331 clients, closed 88 cases, including 81 transgender name changes, and saved clients $11,130 in waived filing fees. In partnership with Cornell Law School, 13 law students volunteered 1,115 hours serving these clients.

VLP’s Community Economic Opportunity Programs, focusing on providing pathways out of poverty, were especially active in response to COVID-19-related legal needs. VLP’s CLARO program continued with virtual clinics. Further, VLP created a COVID-19 Emergency Response program for small businesses and nonprofits to address COVID-related legal needs. VLP’s reentry program, which removes barriers to employment caused by criminal records, continued its work remotely as well.

Over 17,600 community members were provided legal education through presentations to the community and VLP brochures, palm cards and materials were circulated to an additional 3,496 people.

Population Served: General Low Income Population

Area Served: Central region of New York State, primarily Onondaga County

Total Funding: $1,352,310

Total IOLA Grant: $100,000

Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 12.10
- Lawyers: 7.10
- Paralegals: 3.00
- Other: 2.00
Immigration:
Andrea came to the United States from a country that was not welcoming to the LGBT community. After coming to the United States she connected with a great community of friends and support, but she fell out of immigration status and did not have employment authorization or documentation. She eventually met the love of her life, and they were married. Her wife was a single mother who was juggling supporting her children and advocating for the needs of a special needs child. We pushed to file a family based immigration petition and adjustment of status application for our client before the new restrictive public charge rules went into effect (which would have likely impacted her eligibility to become a resident). The couple appeared for their USCIS interview in early 2020, with their VLP attorney. After submitting additional documentation proving the bona fides of their marriage, our client received her lawful permanent residency in June of 2020. This couple is now able to live their lives together and support their family knowing immigration status is no longer an obstacle in their lives.

Power of Attorney:
The client had recently been admitted to the hospital with cancer. While he was in the hospital, his wife had a stroke and became a patient as well. She was his primary agent for his Power of Attorney (POA) and Health Care Proxy (HCP). The client had an alternate POA, however, that agent passed away 14-months ago and they had not had an opportunity to update the forms. The client's daughter reached out to the social work staff at the hospital for help completing an updated POA as soon as possible, as her father needed help setting up rehabilitation treatment. Further, she wanted to make sure his bills and other expenses were paid for. A hospital caseworker familiar with VLP's Hospital Legal Clinic reached out to VLP for assistance. A VLP volunteer attorney consulted with the family and drafted a POA the day of the request for help. The patient had a tracheostomy and was not be able to talk over the phone. Due to hospital visitation COVID-19 restrictions, and recognizing the safety of all parties, the volunteer attorney provided a consultation and assessment of the patient's legal capacity via Facetime/video conference, instead of in-person. With the help of hospital staff, the POA was successfully executed. A couple days later, the client's wife, who had suffered the stroke but her condition had improved, was able to complete a POA with the same volunteer attorney.
Other Services...

Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>31,132 people</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>21,132 people</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Other Legal Related Services: Overview

For VLP, community legal education is a critical component in the continuum of legal services, helping the community understand their legal rights and how to access legal services, including VLP services, that can help them navigate the legal system. VLP’s target population is people who cannot afford legal assistance or who cannot find legal assistance. We also target education for case managers, medical providers, and other direct service providers who work regularly with these populations. The majority of VLP’s Community Legal Education efforts are focused in Central New York, though VLP has programs that cover 19 counties. VLP provides legal education in association with different community-based organizations, including shelters, schools, churches and tenants’ rights groups. These trainings cover the range of legal services that VLP provides, including housing, family law, immigration, elder and consumer law. VLP does more targeted community legal education for immigrant communities and the LGBT community.

Other Legal Related Services: Examples

Early in May, VLP did a strong push for community education and awareness regarding the eviction moratorium and the rights of tenants (especially in light of the Attorney General’s guidance regarding illegal evictions and reports of landlord harassment and illegal lockouts). Over the course of a week, VLP’s Executive Director appeared on a popular local radio morning show and our local news broadcast to provide community education regarding tenants’ rights. VLP’s Eviction Prevention Program Director also did an hour-long Facebook Live presentation with Syracuse.com, our local newspaper, which had over 14,000 views. Through these combined efforts, many tens of thousands of community members received community legal education regarding their rights as renters.

Another such program was through the Syracuse City School District’s new family outreach virtual COVID video platform. We were able to reach 88 parents and participants during the livestreamed information session, and countless more during online video replays. This particular program focused on tenant rights, responsibilities, and the impact of current COVID-related legislative and administrative changes. We believe that offering this and similar informative community outreach programs helped improve landlord tenant relations and ease tenant anxiety during these difficult times.
Significant Collaborations

VLP collaborates with the Onondaga County Bar Association (OCBA). OCBA helps VLP to promote pro bono opportunities and recruit volunteers from OCBA’s membership. OCBA sends e-blasts with VLP updates to its entire membership. OCBA co-sponsors CLEs that VLP provides for free to train volunteer attorneys in exchange for their pro bono time commitment. VLP refers clients who are not financially eligible for VLP’s services to OCBA’s Lawyer Referral Service, and OCBA’s Lawyer Referral Service sends clients who cannot afford an attorney to VLP’s services.

VLP continues to collaborate with several other bar associations, including the Central New York Women’s Bar Association, the Jefferson, Oswego and Cayuga County Bar Associations, the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Upstate New York Chapter, the William Herbert Johnson Bar Association, VLP’s local minority bar association, and New York State Bar Association.

VLP collaborates with many community organizations and agencies that traditionally have housed VLP’s clinics, all of which work to promote VLP programs to their clients and members. These organizations include Onondaga County Libraries, Seymour Library in Auburn, Westcott Community Center, the Syracuse Vet Center, the Rescue Mission, many of Catholic Charities’ programs, Interfaith Works, the Vera House, Oswego County Opportunities, Upstate Hospital, the Samaritan Center, Syracuse City School District, SUNY EOC, Planned Parenthood, ACR Health’s Q Center (LGBT Youth Center), the Gender Wellness Center in Oneonta and many more. In addition to these partners, VLP collaborates with organizations to provide community legal education, including the Housing and Homeless Coalition of CNY, which is made up of over 30 organizations, the CNY Human Services Leadership Coalition, consisting of 70 organizations, the Syracuse Tenants Network, the Workers’ Center of Central New York, Jubilee Homes and more.

VLP’s most significant collaboration with a legal services provider is with Hiscock Legal Aid Society (HLA). VLP and HLA share immigration grants. VLP and HLA work together to attempt to achieve representation of 100% of clients who appear in landlord-tenant court (through daily communication regarding calendars and staff and volunteers who will attend). VLP’s uncontested divorce program only takes clients that are conflicted out of HLA, and so on. VLP also works closely with Legal Services of Central New York (LSCNY), Legal Aid Society of Mid New York (LASMNY), Center for Community Alternatives, Syracuse University College of Law Clinical Program, Cornell University Law School Clinical Program, and CNY Fair Housing.
Trainings

Staff are encouraged to engage in professional development, and a professional development plan is part of monthly supervision review. Staff can attend OCBA CLE trainings for free, and are encouraged to seek out additional training opportunities throughout the state or via webinar that pertain to their areas of practice. VLP pays for all training. VLP also supports leadership development opportunities for staff, and encourages staff to participate in leadership development programs during work hours. All members of staff are encouraged to engage in trainings with their professional associations, regardless of whether they are attorneys or in administration. Additionally, during staff meetings, VLP often brings in a guest speaker or has a staff member present on a topic of interest to the staff. In the past year VLP has devoted substantial staff training time to trauma-informed services. Two of the VLP management team attended a year-long training regarding adapting services to be more trauma-informed, and led several discussions and exercises with the staff regarding providing trauma-informed services.

VLP also provides CLE trainings throughout the year to volunteers, and makes those trainings available to staff, board and volunteers. One significant training that we provided in the past year was an anti-oppression training that walked volunteers through the root causes of many of the challenges facing our clients.

Group Services

VLP’s Economic Opportunity programs represent groups nonprofits and low-income small businesses. In response to COVID-19, VLP launched a COVID-19 Recovery Small Business and Nonprofit Program. This Program provides consultations regarding legal matters stemming from COVID-19. VLP also continues to provide assistance to nonprofits and other small businesses, with a particular focus on assisting businesses owned by people of color.

For example, VLP assisted a young nursing student, who has been operating her own doula business for several years, with an incorporation to become an LLC. Her business is focused on addressing the needs of people of color, especially black pregnant women and mothers, and she regularly does trainings regarding maternal health and discrimination against black mothers. With this incorporation, she will be able to turn her passion project into a formal business.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

VLP has a roster of over 800 volunteers. VLP’s pro bono attorneys provided 702 hours of service, VLP’s panel of law student volunteers provided 2,279 hours of service.

It was a challenging year for pro bono engagement. Many volunteers were not interested in or able to volunteer remotely – many faced professional and personal challenges due to COVID-19, including having their children at home with them while they worked remotely. Some attorneys found that practices became too busy, and the administrative work involved with their own remote work was too overwhelming. Nevertheless, many volunteers did continue their engagement and there were some volunteers who became more committed to their pro bono service than ever before. Volunteers served in all of VLP’s programs throughout the year.

VLP’s pro bono attorneys staff community and court-based clinics and represented clients in 40% of the cases that VLP closed, and VLP law student volunteers work on significant percentage of the remaining cases. VLP’s volunteer attorneys reflect the diversity of the legal community in VLP’s region, with attorneys from firms with over a hundred attorneys down to just one attorney, from the public sector, legal services and public interest organizations. Their diverse knowledge and interests make VLP’s services strong. VLP employees recruit, train, and coordinate the participation of VLP’s volunteer attorneys, who staff all of VLP’s programs. VLP’s pro bono attorneys represent clients in court, take cases for ongoing pro bono representation, assist with preparation of pro se court filings, provide brief service, and provide legal education in the community.

VLP is committed to fostering pro bono commitment in the next generation of lawyers, and incorporates law student volunteers into all aspects of VLP’s programming. Law student volunteers assist with intake and shadow attorneys during their meetings with the clients. They assist with preparation of divorce petitions and with input of client data into VLP’s database. In addition, VLP formally participates in Syracuse University’s Externship Program throughout the year. VLP again hosted Cornell Law School’s LGBT Rights Practicum this year.

**Pro Bono Statistics**

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<th>Category</th>
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<td>Law Students</td>
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<td>Others</td>
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**Sources Of Funding**

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<td>Foundations</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
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