Overview of Achievements, 2020-2021

Volunteer Legal Services Project of Monroe County Inc. (VLSP) closed 1,823 individual cases and 12 group cases during the period 4/1/20-3/31/21, benefitting 4,592 people. 346 cases were closed by pro bono volunteers providing representation in matters involving microenterprise, domestic violence, eviction and foreclosure prevention, denial of unemployment insurance benefits, immigration and consumer problems, among other civil legal issues. VLSP closed 363 cases with advice and brief service at VLSP's nine clinics. Pro bono attorneys provided legal advice on 190 of those cases. (1) Micro-entrepreneur Clinic: Pro bono attorneys provided information about a business/legal topic of interest to micro-entrepreneurs. Workshops focused on assisting small business owners with tax and other legal issues exacerbated by the Covid crisis. This clinic is currently being held remotely. (2) Debt Clinic - Experienced bankruptcy attorneys met individually with clients seeking bankruptcy assistance to answer questions and screen for eligibility. This is currently being held remotely, but will move to in-person when pandemic-related restrictions are lifted. (3) Wills Clinic - Pro bono attorneys prepared wills, health care proxies, designation of standby guardian and other documents for the elderly and disabled, and other seriously-ill clients. In response to the Covid crisis, VLSP expanded these services to healthcare workers. This clinic is currently being held remotely on an individual basis. (4) Family Law Custody Clinic - pro bono attorneys provided advice on Family Court custody or visitation issues and assisted in completing petition forms. This clinic is currently being held remotely and will resume in-person at VLSP’s office once pandemic-related restrictions are lifted. (5) Federal Pro Se Assistance Program (PSAP) - pro bono attorneys provided free, limited scope legal assistance to non-prisoner pro se litigants with cases pending in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of New York. This clinic is currently being held remotely and will resume in-person at the Federal Courthouse, WDNY once when pandemic-related restrictions are lifted. (6) Family Preparedness and Immigration Clinic - Pro bono attorneys provided legal information, advice, and representation to immigrants and migrant workers who are facing legal challenges. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and attendant complications, VLSP adapted the program service delivery model to continue addressing the critical legal needs of vulnerable immigrants and migrant workers. Working with pro bono attorneys, service provider representatives, and interpreters, VLSP is offering crisis-related legal support and emergency services for basic needs in underserved communities. (7) Willow Domestic Violence Center/HEAL Clinic - Pro bono attorneys advised residents of the shelter on matrimonial and consumer issues. This clinic is currently being held virtually to bring these much needed services to domestic violence shelters in the Rochester area. (8) Child Support Clinic - Provides advice on child support issues and assistance in completing petition forms provided. This clinic is currently being held remotely on an individual basis and will resume in-person at VLSP’s office once pandemic-related restrictions are lifted. (9) PSAP for Prisoners - a pilot expansion of our existing Federal Pro Se Assistance Program (PSAP), discussed above. Launched in January of 2021, PSAP for Prisoners enables prisoner litigants to seek the same assistance non-prisoner pro se litigants receive from PSAP. The pilot program is available on a remote basis only to prisoners in Wende Correctional Facility and Five Points Correctional Facility. The Court directs litigants to the program and, as with PSAP, litigants are paired with volunteer attorneys and law students.

Population Served: General Low Income Population

Area Served: Monroe County

Total Funding: $1,266,931

Total IOLA Grant: $200,000

Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 15.90
- Lawyers: 4.90
- Paralegals: 7.00
- Others 4.00
Rosa, a young mother of a four-year-old child, had been involved in an abusive relationship for years. Rosa knew she had to escape when after revealing to her partner that she was pregnant, her partner admitted to her that he was a sex offender and that he had sexually assaulted his sister when he was 16 years old. Her partner and soon-to-be father of their child had been physically abusive to her in the past, but he would always plead with her not to call the police, saying he would go to jail if he got in any trouble. On one occasion that she will never forget, he held her over a stair-railing, threatening to throw her over it. After moving to Rochester, NY, the physical abuse continued in front of the child when the father would come to visit with the child. On multiple occasions, the father would not allow Rosa to leave for hours at a time. After the most recent occurrence of this happening again, Rosa decided she had finally had enough. She filed a Petition for an Order of Protection after receiving medical attention for injuries he had inflicted on her. Rosa contacted VLSP relaying that she was in dire need of an Order of Protection, and further indicating she also needed to establish custody and visitation.

An experienced and dedicated pro bono volunteer willingly took on both the Order of Protection and custody cases on her behalf. The attorney advocated strongly for her and was able to help her obtain an Order of Protection as well as sole custody and limited contact by the Father with their child, after several court appearances and arduous negotiations. The award of sole custody and terms of visitation which only allow visitation to occur in the safety and care of a supervisor or therapist provided Rosa with a feeling of safety and stability that she had not previously had. For Rosa, access to an attorney was the impetus for her to change her life in a positive direction, and one that would ultimately keep her and her child safe. Without the legal assistance she obtained, the outcome would have likely been vastly different.

Later reaching out to VLSP, Rosa relayed, “things turned out in the best way possible for me and my child. It was such a difficult time for me, but because of you and your organization, I was able to move forward. I was feeling helpless and alone, having been turned away from other legal services agencies who were at capacity. I was starting to regret ever calling the police in the first place. You most certainly helped in securing my child’s well-being as well as well as my own. Thank you.”
### Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>People</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,242</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>5,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach Assistance</td>
<td>568</td>
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**Other Legal Related Services: Overview**

VLSP's Virtual Help Center assisted 123 unrepresented litigants during the contract year. Using a live chat capability, the Virtual Help Center has pro bono attorneys and VLSP Staff available online to answer legal information questions, provide court documents online, complete virtual notarization requests, and provide referrals.

VLSP conducted 5 free clinics for small business micro-entrepreneurs with the assistance of pro bono transactional attorneys. 90 micro-entrepreneurs attended these clinics. Clinic topics included Legal Aspects of Forming a New Business - A presentation on Legal, Tax and Regulatory Issues for Small Businesses; Community Wealth Building: Your Business, Your Taxes; Post Pandemic: Operating a Business Under a New Norm; Guidelines to form and sustain a Not-for-profit organization; and Choosing the Right Entity for your Food Business. One community training session was organized for micro-entrepreneurs and outreach was conducted to various community organizations.

VLSP conducted 8 Family Preparedness and Immigration Clinics and served 64 families. Clinics are held in rural locations and assist undocumented farm workers with developing and implementing a “family preparedness plan” to protect their children and property in the event that an adult family member is taken into custody by ICE or put into removal proceedings. At each clinic, attorneys advise clients of their legal rights and provide individualized counseling and advice concerning immigration and related legal matters.
(1) CLE Seminars. VLSP is a certified CLE provider and provides regular trainings for the private bar which are also offered to non-attorneys. In 2020, VLSP staff attorneys helped prepare and present CLE trainings on: Immigration 101: An Update in the Naturalization Process; Immigration Family Preparedness Clinic; and A Primer for Effective Pro Bono Representation in Section 1983 Civil Rights Litigation. In total, 184 attorneys participated in the trainings.

(2) Technology. VLSP continues to be a leader in community-based service delivery and technology innovations to increase access to justice in Monroe County. Our online intake system has vastly improved access to civil legal services for those who are unable to contact providers during normal business hours. VLSP’s website is mobile user friendly. LiveHelp (web and mobile chat) is available when our office is open and visitors can be connected in real time to a legal advocate. VLSP organization-wide text messaging efficiently connects clients with paralegals. Facebook and Twitter posts facilitate outreach to both the target population and pro bono attorneys.

(3) Diversity & Inclusion. VLSP’s Executive Director is actively engaged in promoting diversity, inclusion and equity at VLSP and the community at large. She currently serves as Chair of the Diversity Committee of the Greater Rochester Association for Women Attorneys, and is a member of the President’s Diversity Committee of the Monroe County Bar Association. She is a co-chair of the Diversity Programming Committee of the NYSBA Partnership Planning Steering Committee. Personal memberships include the national Iranian-American Bar Association, and the Council for the Advancement of Muslim Professionals.
Other Services

Significant Collaborations

Of national and statewide significance is the co-location of the Rochester civil legal services partners in the Telesca Center for Justice. It is a one-of-a-kind partnership with myriad ongoing opportunities for coordination and benefits: infrastructure, technology, office space, program services, funding and outreach, media, volunteer recruitment and recognition. It remains the national standard for civil legal services partnership and collaboration. The building-wide joint reception area includes a computer terminal kiosk where individuals can obtain online information via LawHelpNY, VLSP’s online application portal, and other free resources.

Empire Justice Center, Legal Assistance of Western NY (“LAWNY”), and the Legal Aid Society collaborate with VLSP to provide legal services to individuals with HIV/AIDS.

Volunteer Legal Services Project and Legal Assistance of Western NY collaborate to provide legal services as part of a health-related legal services program. The collaborative program provides legal services to patients of Rochester Regional Health System and University of Rochester Medical Center in a medical-legal partnership model.

VLSP continued its collaboration with the Legal Aid Society of Rochester (LASROC) to provide pro bono volunteers to assist asylum-seekers in Monroe and surrounding counties. VLSP receives referrals from LASROC for clients in need of extended representation in asylum matters. VLSP has recruited a panel of pro bono attorneys willing to take on these matters. In addition to VLSP’s Immigration Legal Advocate and Paralegal, staff attorneys at LASROC with immigration expertise also help to mentor VLSP volunteer attorney teams.

VLSP, LAWNY, and the Legal Aid Society collaborate on the Justice For All Right to Counsel in Evictions Pilot Project. Developed in partnership with a diverse group of community stakeholders as part of the NYS Court’s Justice for All initiative, the Project integrates legal services with current and future homelessness prevention programs offered by local, state, and federal agencies. The Project provides holistic legal services to qualified tenants, including representation before, during and after court, and ensures that they are connected to other community resources.
Impact Cases

Case #1
Educate a Nation Foundation is a non-profit organization that focuses on helping Black single mothers in college by providing scholarships and resources to help them be successful in college and in their careers. The Foundation contacted VLSP for assistance with reviewing its bylaws and was directed to one of the virtual legal clinics facilitated by VLSP’s Microentrepreneur Pro Bono Program. At this clinic, pro bono attorney Jon C. Lazenby of Kaman, Berlove, Marafioti, Jacobstein & Goldman, LLP provided legal advice to the Foundation regarding corporate governance review of a New York not-for-profit corporation by discussing bylaws provisions, fundraising, and grant distribution, the establishment of the board of directors, and related tax-exemption procedures. With the assistance of Mr. Lazenby, the Client filed the Tax Exempt Incorporation for the 501c3 on February 6, 2021, and is pending a decision from the IRS.

Case #2
The Western New York Coalition of Farmworker Agencies is a not-for-profit organization established to help the safety and health needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families in Western NY. Their mission is to facilitate information exchange, advocacy, and collaboration among organizations that serve migrants and seasonal farmworkers to identify and overcome barriers to equal rights and respect in their place of employment and the communities in which they live and work. The coalition came to VLSP seeking help with reviewing the organization’s bylaws and advice on 990 forms and steps to obtain a Sales Tax Exemption Certificate.

The Coalition met with pro bono attorney Lawrence A. Kallaur, Esq., an associate from Wood, Oviatt, and Gilman, LLP. Attorney Kallaur provided advice and counsel on what forms needed to be completed for the Tax Sales Exemption after a 501c3 is incorporated. Under the Attorney's advice, the Coalition filed their CT-247 Form and obtained its Sale Tax Exemption. The Coalition also retained a CPA to file the 990-N and CHAR500. Since then, the organization reported conducting various community events and using the Sales Tax Exemption to provide masks, hand sanitizers, food and other hygiene items to over 1,000 of farmworkers and their families.

Case #3
Studio Z is a not-for-profit Performing Arts Conservatory offering a one-of-a-kind training experience for youth with a passion for performing arts. The Studio prides itself on serving students of diverse socio-economic backgrounds. VLSP assigned the studio to pro bono attorney Julia A. Garver from Merzbach & Solomon, P.C., who along with her staff donated over 33 hours of pro bono time to this case. Attorney Garver helped the Studio revise their bylaws and assisted them with filing the IRS Form 1023, NYS CHAR 410, registration and related NYS documents, and the amendment to Certificate of Incorporation. The Studio successfully received their not-for-profit status and Tax Exemption Status with the IRS and New York State. Because of their tax exemption status, the organization is now able to sponsor a student for a semester of classes or production, including field trips to expose students to professional theatre.
Trainings

VLSP provides mandatory diversity, inclusion, competency and equity training to all 16 staff members on a quarterly basis in order to improve cultural awareness, knowledge and skills. Diversity and Inclusion trainings attended by staff during the past year include: Serving Transgender Clients, Undoing Racism Training coordinated by the City of Rochester, VLSP Racial Justice Initiative (RJI), and the Racial Justice and Equity Initiative (REJI) coordinated by the Urban League of Rochester, N.Y., Inc. VLSP also participated in the 21 Day Racial Equity Challenge organized by the United Way of Greater Rochester. VLSP offers all employees the opportunity to attend professional development programming and CLEs during work hours (and pays registration fees, if any).

The VLSP Executive Director and several staff members attend the ABA/NLADA Equal Justice Conference, the Civil Legal Aid Technology Conference, and the NYSBA Partnership Conference.

VLSP is a certified CLE provider and provides regular trainings for the private bar which are also offered to non-attorneys. In 2020, VLSP staff attorneys helped prepare and present CLE trainings on: Immigration 101: An Update in the Naturalization Process; Immigration Family Preparedness Clinic; and A Primer for Effective Pro Bono Representation in Section 1983 Civil Rights Litigation. In total, 184 attorneys participated in the trainings.
**Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement**

The VLSP mission is to improve the quality of life of low-income people in Monroe County by ensuring the existence of a readily available panel of skilled pro bono attorneys to resolve serious civil legal problems of the indigent. From April 1, 2020 - March 31, 2021, pro bono volunteers donated 3992.71 hours of pro bono time. VLSP is a certified CLE provider and provides regular trainings for the private bar which is also offered to non-attorneys where appropriate. Our access to private, government attorneys and corporate counsel in Monroe County is unmatched by any other local legal services provider.

VLSP offers a broad range of volunteer opportunities for non-attorney advocates which includes paralegals, law students, college students, law school graduates awaiting admission to the bar and legal secretaries. VLSP partners with the Monroe Community College Paralegal Studies Certificate Program, the Rochester City School District and suburban high schools whose students receive training and hands on experience assisting staff attorneys in VLSP programs. Significantly, VLSP awards the prestigious William E. McKnight Award each year at the county bar association Law Day luncheon and awards ceremony to pro bono attorneys whose pro bono service reflects a commitment to access to justice. It is a highly sought after award and receives great recognition in the legal community.

VLSP’s “Pro Bono Portal” increased efficiency in placing clients with pro bono attorneys and monitoring case progress. Pro bono attorneys who have been screened and accepted as VLSP volunteers are able to access real-time information on existing cases and receive instant alerts via email and text message when new cases are available for placement. The portal confidentially and securely facilitates conflict checks, automatic updates and attorney time entry. The portal is integrated with our case management system and our website. Attorneys are also able to collaborate on cases that require representation from multiple areas of expertise.

**Pro Bono Statistics**

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<td>Others</td>
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**Sources Of Funding**

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