Overview of Achievements, 2020-2021

The start of the COVID 19 pandemic brought many challenges to the Center for Legal Services (CLS). The CLS met the challenges with creativity and resilience to continue delivering legal services to survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking. When MSP moved to remote work, the CLS staff adjusted by moving to more digital solutions for ourselves and our clients.

We prepared applications and provided remote services through a telehealth platform, ensuring that our clients could see us if that was what they were most comfortable with. Clients were asked to mail or email us documentation to support their applications. Because the early months of the pandemic were so uncertain and everyone was ordered to stay home unless traveling outside was essential, our clients couldn’t mail us documents. Email was a challenge for most clients who did not have email accounts and did not have scanners at home. The CLS produced 6 tutorials in both English and Spanish on how to scan using a cell phone, how to set up an email account and how to attach documents to an email address. These tutorials were set up on our website as well as emailed to clients who requested them. This made a tremendous difference for clients. Many have thanked us for teaching them how to use their phones for these tasks.

In looking at ways to deliver services and expand our resources, we provided staff development to the Bilingual Paralegals (5) by having them participate in the NYIC/BIA Accreditation program. The majority have passed the exam and are in the process of finalizing paperwork to receive accreditation. This training as well as other training supplemented by the CLS have allowed the Bilingual Paralegals to take on more cases and build their skills under the supervision of an attorney. In addition to the immigration work they now undertake, the CLS provided additional training in conducting more robust intake of family law cases so that Petitions are completed more quickly.

We trained many pro bono attorneys to handle cases remotely over the summer. The pro bono attorneys prepared Adjustment of Status cases for former CLS clients who had received legal status because they had been victims of a crime or been survivors of trafficking. When a survivor is served, his family is as well. One client who had been trafficked a few years ago, was ready to file for his green card. He had brought his wife and 5 children to the US from the Philippines. All six applications and many others were filed this reporting period.

This family was one of among hundreds of clients who benefited from the significant savings the CLS obtained for its clients. In this reporting period, in total, we saved clients over $110,000 dollars in fees waived and child support and spousal support awarded. Many clients we represented had either been sick from COVID or had lost their jobs because of the shut down so these savings were all the more needed this year.

Population Served: Female and Male Survivors of Domestic Violence and Human Trafficking

Area Served: Westchester County

Total Funding: $1,944,313

Total IOLA Grant: $87,500

Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 12.80
- Lawyers: 8.00
- Paralegals: 4.80
Direct Legal Services
1,948 people benefitted
666 legal cases closed

Examples

In the final quarter of 2020, we continued representing a mother of triplets with special needs in her petition for child support. The mother and father had divorced in 2012. The father is a high earner, having held management positions at various companies. The mother of the triplets works part time to supplement her SSDI. In 2018, the couple’s divorce agreement was modified by the family court because John was earning over $100,000 annually. He was ordered to pay child support in the amount of $3100 monthly. He was also obligated to pay 76% of the health care costs of the triplets. The father has history of paying child support late, often skipping a month or two and then making smaller payments to make up the arrears.

In January 2020, the father claimed to have lost his job so he filed a modification of child support in May. The mother of the triplets filed a violation of child support because the father had unilaterally lowered his child support payments by $400 monthly. The father owns a home in Connecticut and rents a luxury apartment in the Bronx. He inherited a trust account and owns a new Tesla. MSP has represented the mother at two hearing and one fact finding. The mother sought a willfulness hearing due to the father’s failure to pay child support on time and in full.

Our attorney researched the father’s employment history, educational history, credit card bills, and spending habits building a case against the father and confirming the amount of the arrears. On the eve of trial, she settled with opposing counsel for the full amount of the child support owed. The modification fact finding began in November but was adjourned to 9 February. Discovery revealed the amount of the trust account as well as the father’s employment history. Opposing counsel moved for temporary reduction of child support but our attorney successfully argued that the father had enough income and assets to continue with the existing child support amount.
Other Services...

**Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>People</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>606 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>481 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>25 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Assistance</td>
<td>100 people</td>
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**Other Legal Related Services**

The CLS reached out to many organizations in Westchester County to offer presentations on topics specific to the organization and to introduce the CLS to the organization. We partnered with the Human Trafficking Department in presentations that offered the Dynamics of Human Trafficking with Immigration Remedies for Trafficking Survivors. We presented at Pace Law School, The Girls Scouts, The Family Justice Center, The Yonkers Sanctuary Movement and the Westchester Black Women’s Political Caucus. Unfortunately, we were unable to reach more organizations because of the pandemic.

For the organizations that didn’t have capacity for virtual presentations, we provided them flyers on the services of the CLS as well as how to contact us should they want presentations.

We are working on updating our pro se materials to incorporate the recent changes in immigration law as an opportunity to provide pro se materials to visitors to our website as well as on Facebook and Youtube.
Other Services

Significant Collaborations

CLS staff take proactive steps to create awareness of available legal options among those experiencing DV/HT, by forming partnerships with community groups, leading multi-disciplinary taskforces, recruiting Pro Bono attorneys to expand access to legal knowledge, and training specialized volunteers to create bridges to and from immigrant and minority communities. These activities build trust, awareness, and pathways to service. CLS staff also increasingly engage in "virtual outreach"- via Facebook Live, Zoom, and other online platforms – using technology to reach ever-wider and varied audiences.

We perform extensive and intentional outreach to those likely to come in contact with victims of DV or HT: law enforcement, healthcare professionals, schools, faith-based organizations, social services agencies, and other community partners, building and maintaining existing relationships and forming partnerships to address newly identified needs. Such networks facilitate cross-referrals, and we are proud to serve as a trusted local resource for professionals from many fields who seek our expert guidance on how to respond to DV/HT. In 2020, we built or bolstered connections to partners serving specific populations in our service area, including Neighbors Link, the YWCA of White Plains, Lifting Up Westchester, CHHOP, Sakhi for South Asian Women, Sister to Sister International, and others, and we will continue to identify and connect to groups who can help further our organizational goals.

MSP is a key partner in the Westchester Family Justice Center, which provides access to supportive and legal victim services from its location in the White Plains Courthouse. Through the FJC, victims can swiftly connect to co-located supportive and legal services on-site by advocates from MSP and our partner agencies.

CLS attorneys are actively involved in the community as members of numerous professional associations including Westchester Women’s Bar Association, Westchester County Bar Association, Westchester County Domestic Violence Council, Westchester County Family Justice Center, Westchester Women’s Agenda, Nonprofit Westchester, and Westchester County Anti-Trafficking Task Force. We work closely with attorneys from Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, The Legal Aid Society of Westchester, Pace Women's Justice Center, Make the Road NY, The Worker Justice Center of New York, and private practice, to avoid duplication of effort and strengthen the availability of legal services throughout the area. CLS provides such partners with formal training and education on DV/HT and the law, as well as providing informal consultation on related matters as they arise.

In 2020, MSP enthusiastically joined as a partner in the newly created Faith Based Court Access Initiative, through which the 9th Judicial District and Westchester County Faith Based Leadership operate as a safe-haven for unrepresented persons who lack access to technology, enabling them to access legal services remotely and safely from the offices of participating churches around the county.

CLS staff lead or participate in local working groups attended by collaborating legal organizations to better address victim issues, including Hudson Valley Immigration Providers, The 9th Judicial District Access to Justice Initiative, and the Westchester Working Group on Domestic Violence and Immigration Issues. These collaborations enable us to leverage resources and address systemic issues. CLS staff actively participate in the County government sponsored Westchester County Domestic Violence Council and Domestic Violence Working Group, which include representatives from all of the domestic violence legal services providers in Westchester as well as the District Attorney’s Office, Department of Probation and Westchester County Police.
Technology

As the pandemic hit, the agency began using the Microsoft Teams platform which helped us stay connected to one another as well as learn the tools associated with the platform which prepared us for when the Family Courts moved to Teams for virtual conferences and hearings.

The CLS also invested in Adobe Pro installing the program on the server and on individual desktops. This allowed us to prepare applications which for immigration filings can number hundreds of pages. We were able to collate scanned documents or printed documents into one filing. This created efficiency and ease of filing applications which could be assembled remotely then printed by any staff member who was in the office who could mail it immediately. It eliminates the need for a file copy because the final submission is saved as a full copy scan in the client’s electronic file. This program saves time and resources.

Trainings

MSP conducts internal trainings on various matters and issues facing clients, with a focus on providing such clients with quality and situationally appropriate services, including The Dynamics of Domestic Violence, Working with Victims/Survivors, Confidentiality, Effects of DV on Children, Safety Planning, Mandated Reporting of Child Abuse/Neglect, Suicide Prevention, and Intimate Partner Violence in LGBTQ Communities. These core trainings are mandatory for all staff and held on a rotating basis throughout the year. In 2019, New York State passed a law mandating that all direct care workers who provide DV shelter and services receive training in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and in response, MSP has added ACEs to our roster of required trainings for all staff.

As an expressly anti-oppression organization, MSP believes in the equality of all people, and we recognize that our clients come to us while navigating different structural and social injustices that affect their experiences of survivorship. As a result, we provide training for staff to deepen their understanding of intersectionality, racism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and the importance of language access. The internal trainings offer opportunities to learn best practices as well as engage with other departments in the agency to enhance understanding of other needs and services for victims as well as improve cross-referrals.

MSP requires all staff to attend "Undoing Racism" – a highly regarded two-day immersive training (with related follow-up workshops), presented by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond – which introduces participants to the concepts of structural racism and encourages them to grapple with the history of racist oppression in the United States, preparing participants to take an active role in dismantling structures of racism and oppression that they encounter or witness. In late 2020, MSP’s entire staff participated in a series of anti-racism workshops, explicitly tailored to our work, which explored how racism shows up in the systems that we and our clients navigate. These conversations will continue into 2021, as we incorporate discussions of racism and systemic oppression into team meetings, creating a space for difficult conversations to examine issues critical to the lives of our clients and staff.

The CLS provides legal trainings relevant to each practice area and encourages staff to attend external Continuing Legal Education credit courses. In looking at the ways we could serve clients better and expand our services, we began two distinct training modules this reporting period. In the first, the entire CLS was trained in preparing and drafting family offense petitions. Beginning with this baseline of knowledge, the Bilingual Paralegal Advocates can assist in drafting initial, pro se petitions when a caller for services is unable to reach the Probation Department. Once the initial petition is filed, the petitioner could return to MSP to determine if our attorneys have capacity to represent the petitioner in further proceedings.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

MSP’s Sister-in-Law (SIL) Program recruits, trains, and supervises volunteers to accompany and provide support to victims during court appearances, interviews with law enforcement, medical appointments, and interactions with government agencies, and other situations where our clients need extra encouragement. Volunteers in the SIL Program attend 30-hours of training prior to working directly with clients and receive support and substantive training from MSP’s dedicated coordinator of volunteer initiatives as they navigate their crucial supportive role. During the pandemic, the SIL volunteers were not able to accompany survivors to Family Court instead they provided interpretation and translation service to clients who spoke Spanish and Portuguese facilitating communication between client and attorney by interpreters who were trauma-informed as a result of their extensive training.

Pro bono attorneys are integral to MSP’s work, and CLS lawyers are committed to expanding access to legal services by recruiting, training, mentoring, and supervising volunteer attorneys from a number of large prominent law firms, including Clifford Chance, DLA Piper; Proskauer Rose; Davis Polk & Wardwell; Loeb & Loeb; Goodwin Proctor; corporate counsel working in-house at firms such as AXA XL; and individual attorneys from across Westchester.

The CLS hosts training clinics to provide pro bono attorneys with the knowledge and skills to provide practical assistance to survivors of DV or HT. We have recently supervised pro bono attorneys in delivering assistance to clients in U-Visa Adjustment cases, naturalization, and other forms of immigration relief. In each instance, the pro bono attorney is sufficiently trained and supervised so clients can feel confident that their applications will be error-free, reducing the risk of rejection. In turn, lawyers gain valuable skills and enjoy a rewarding process that provides an opportunity to see an entire representation through to the end.

The CLS pivoted to training pro bono attorneys using online platforms, and we are examining new ways of engaging and recruiting pro bono volunteers and expanding the remote delivery of pro bono legal services. Last summer we trained pro bono summer associates who assisted in preparing Adjustment of Status applications for clients who were eligible after holding U status. The program was so successful last summer that our pro bono partners have asked that it be replicated again this summer for their class of summer associates.

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<th>Pro Bono Statistics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attorneys:</td>
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<td>Law Students:</td>
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Sources Of Funding

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<tr>
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