Overview of Achievements, 2018-2019

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of Onondaga County (OnVLP) Community Economic Development Programs, which focus on providing pathways out of poverty to the community through support for low-income entrepreneurs and job seekers, were both very active. The program that provides legal assistance to low-income entrepreneurs closed 128 cases. New Start, OnVLP’s reentry program which removes barriers to employment and housing caused by criminal records through correcting criminal records and obtaining Certificates of Rehabilitation, continues to thrive through community partnerships, closed 91 cases, benefiting 254 community members.

OnVLP’s Homeless Advocacy and Prevention Program focuses on addressing legal needs that often are barriers to rising out of homelessness, such as child support modification, divorce and employment issues related to past criminal convictions, while at the same time providing general advice and referrals for other essentials of life such as access to health care and subsistence income. The program operates in Onondaga, Cayuga and Oswego Counties, with clinics in five homeless shelters, one soup kitchen, two libraries and a homeless services providers. Combined with OnVLP’s Talk-to-a-Lawyer Community Clinics, there are now 34 in-person and 8 telephone-hotline clinics per month. Together, these programs closed 840 cases, benefiting 1,535 community members.

The immigration program closed 166 cases, benefiting 464 community members. In addition to operating four monthly drop-in immigration legal clinics, staff and volunteers represented clients in cases varying from asylum to medical waivers for naturalization, family-based petitions and special immigrant juvenile status.

In September, OnVLP expanded its Veterans program to include a weekly outreach clinic at the Veterans Outreach Center in Watertown, in addition to monthly outreach clinics at the Vet Center in Syracuse and Clear Path for Veterans. This program closed 99 cases, benefiting 163 people.

The Q Law LGBT program was also very active, closing 72 cases, including 57 transgender name changes. Clients saved $11,970 in waived filing fees and received waiver of publication so that their safety was not jeopardized by the process.

OnVLP’s eviction defense programs closed 1,024 cases, a 15% increase over last year, benefiting 2,930 people, and saved tenants $455,572 this year, allowing them to use that money to avoid or delay eviction or successfully relocate. OnVLP’s pro bono and staff attorneys either prevented or delayed eviction giving clients time to seek alternate housing for 72% of cases closed, and for 31% the amount owed was reduced. In January 2018, OnVLP began a comprehensive program to address Syracuse Housing Authority (SHA) eviction cases, through outreach, education and direct representation and diversion of clients in landlord tenant court. This effort is already having tremendous results. In 2017 SHA filed over 800 landlord tenant matters, whereas in all of 2018 SHA only filed 200 cases. The effort has been so successful that the City of Syracuse is looking to replicate the model with other landlords.

OnVLP’s Family Court Clinics, which assists unrepresented litigants with preparing petitions for paternity, child support, custody and visitation closed 822 cases, benefiting 2,578 community members.

OnVLP’s uncontested divorce program, closed 42 cases, 22 of which were completed divorces, and saved the clients $6,710 in filing fees. OnVLP also continues its clinic for victims of domestic violence at the Vera House, which closed 57 cases.

OnVLP’s Elder Law and Special Needs programing, which includes a court-based Surrogate’s Court Clinic, a panel assisting with wills and powers of attorney, consultations at the annual Elder Law Fair, the weekly hospital medical-legal partnership clinic, closed 185 cases, benefiting 344 people.

A total of 1,778 individuals were provided legal education through presentations to the community and brochures and materials were circulated to an additional 2,720 people, while 223 participated in workshops or clinics.
**Population Served:** General Low Income Population

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

**Total Funding:** $1,063,599

**Total IOLA Grant:** $110,000

**Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:**
- **Total Staff:** 9.70
- **Lawyers:** 6.70
- **Paralegals:** 1.50
- **Other:** 1.50

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**Direct Legal Services**

8,766 people benefitted
3,433 legal cases closed

**Breakdown of cases by Legal Problem Area**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Rights</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>3,291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>1,158</td>
<td>3,182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>1,139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In January, a caseworker from Onondaga County referred a senior citizen to OnVLP’s office for assistance with immigration and government benefits. The Medicaid office had requested proof of his immigrant and financial status. However, the client’s green card had expired a few years ago, and he had neither the funds nor the cognitive ability to renew it himself. Also, because he suffered from agoraphobia, he couldn’t come to the office for a consultation and follow-up. OnVLP’s attorney went to the client’s house with his caseworker. As she worked on the paperwork in the client’s living room, she explained to the client that his receipt of public assistance made him eligible for a fee waiver, so he was able to save $540. The client’s new green card arrived in late June, and the caseworker and OnVLP’s attorney went to the client’s house to give him the green card in early July, and with the new card the client was able to maintain his Medicaid.

The Client, “Kristin,” was diagnosed with breast cancer and was very concerned about her housing stability. She wrote a check to the landlord for $11,363, the landlord signed the check with a note written on the check saying “for rent”. Because of her cancer treatment she has had to stop work. In late summer of 2018 her landlord sold the house and moved to Florida. The new owner did not approach Kristin until October to let her know of the sale and to demand rent payments moving forward of $650 a month. Kristin showed this landlord the check copy saying she was all paid until December of 2018. The landlord called the previous owner who said the check only covered years of back rent not current rent for 2018. She would not transfer the funds paid. The landlord’s attorney argued since the check does not show the months of rent allocated then there is no proof she does not owe the $1,750 in back rent since the new owner took over. OnVLP’s attorney demanded an adjournment to give Kristin time to get to DSS to see whether they will pay the arrears. The court agreed to the adjournment with a return date in two weeks. OnVLP advocated for Kristin to connect her with all the services available to provide financial assistance to cancer patients. DSS agreed to pay arrears. Disability will take another month to kick in but Kristin will be able to stay in the apartment moving forward. The arrears were paid and the case was dismissed. Without the OnVLP attorneys representing her in court that day she would currently be homeless.
Other Services...

Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,729 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>4,498 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>1,231 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other Legal Related Services: Overview

OnVLP provides community legal education and outreach in many settings. The goal is to help the community understand their legal rights and how to access legal services, including OnVLP’s, that help them navigate the legal system. OnVLP’s target population is people with low incomes in Central New York, with the majority of clients served in Onondaga County. OnVLP provides legal education at different community-based organizations, including shelters, schools, churches and tenants’ rights groups. These trainings cover the range of legal services that OnVLP provides, including housing, family law, income maintenance, and consumer law. The topics are tailored to the interests of the population served by the organization.

OnVLP also distributes pro se assistance handouts for Landlord Tenant Court. One provides information to tenants regarding how to protect their rights as a tenant and how to prepare for landlord tenant court. The other explains the outcomes of Landlord Tenant Court and informs clients what to do next. This brochure is given out every day at Syracuse City Court. It also is available to the public in many of the justice courts throughout Onondaga County. OnVLP does not closely track the number of copies that are distributed, but a conservative estimate is that over 1,000 were distributed.

OnVLP continues to maintain a Legal Reference Table that is used throughout Onondaga County by legal service providers and pro bono volunteers to make accurate legal referrals. OnVLP goes to great lengths to obtain updated information from over 50 different organizations, agencies and courts that serve low-income clients in Onondaga County, and seeks out relevant legal information to facilitate the provision of legal information and pro se assistance by attorneys (such as the form Living Will). While this Reference Table is not distributed to the general public, it is distributed for free to agencies and pro bono attorneys that use it to make referrals at 54 drop-in clinics a month in Onondaga County, benefiting thousands of people.

Finally, OnVLP connected to over 2,720 people through distribution of brochures and over 10,000 visitors to its website throughout the year.

Other Legal Related Services—Examples

This year, OnVLP’s Eviction Defense attorney engaged in many Know Your Rights trainings on renting 101 throughout the community. She created a three-part lunch series which took place at the Samaritan Center, one of the local soup kitchens in Syracuse. She gave a similar presentation at Interfaith Works, a local refugee resettlement program, where there were three different interpreters (Somali, Nepali and French) at the same time.

The largest single educational event was the collaborative Elder Law Fair, which is a full day of free seminars on legal issues of interest to older adults and their families is provided to the community. OnVLP spearheads the project and takes care of all aspects of planning, including organizing the schedule of events for the day and recruiting and organizing the lawyer volunteers. Twenty four different legal educational sessions were provided in one day to over 175 community members.

In a new partnership, OnVLP’s staff attorneys now present at a local Culinary Arts Training program at Catholic Charities on a monthly basis to discuss various Know Your Rights issues, covering such varied topics as housing, child support, education and more.
OnVLP collaborates with the Onondaga County Bar Association (OCBA). OCBA helps to promote pro bono programming and recruit volunteers from OCBA’s membership. OCBA sends out e-blasts with OnVLP updates to the entire membership. OCBA co-sponsors CLEs that are provided for free to train OnVLP’s volunteer attorneys in exchange for their pro bono time commitment. OnVLP refers clients who are not financially eligible for OnVLP services to OCBA’s Lawyer Referral Service, and OCBA’s Lawyer Referral Service sends clients who cannot afford an attorney to OnVLP services.

OnVLP continues to administer pro bono programs for the Central New York Women’s Bar Association (CNYWBA), including CNYWBA’s weekly Vera House clinic, where pro bono attorneys provide free legal assistance and information to domestic violence survivors. OnVLP also partners with the Jefferson County Bar Association in support of the Jefferson County Family Court Clinic, and the Oswego and Cayuga Bar Associations for the clinics in those counties. These collaborations include presenting a CLE with these Bar Associations. OnVLP also continues its collaboration with the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Upstate New York Chapter. OnVLP collaborates with the William Herbert Johnson Bar Association, the local minority bar association as well. OnVLP continues to be very active on the state-wide level with the New York State Bar Association’s Pro Bono efforts. OnVLP participates in all statewide meetings and conferences regarding pro bono work. OnVLP is also a member of the New York Legal Services Coalition.

OnVLP collaborates with many community organizations and agencies that house OnVLP’s clinics, all of which not only provide space but also work to promote the programs to their clients and members. These organizations include Onondaga County Libraries (four different branches), Seymour Library, Westcott Community Center, the Syracuse Vet Center, Watertown Vet Outreach Center, Clear Path for Veterans, the Rescue Mission (both Syracuse and Auburn), Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement Services, Interfaith Works, the Vera House, Upstate Hospital, the Samaritan Center, Catholic Charities’ Men’s Shelter, Salvation Army’s Women’s Shelter and Family Shelter, Syracuse City School District, SUNY EOC, Planned Parenthood, ACR Health’s Q Center (LGBT Youth Center), and many more. In addition to these partners, OnVLP collaborates with many other organizations to provide community legal education, including the Housing and Homeless Coalition, which is made up of over 30 organizations, the Syracuse Tenants Network, the Workers’ Center of Central New York, and more.

One of the most significant collaboration is with Centerstate CEO, CNY’s chamber of commerce, which runs both a WorkTrain Program for jobseekers and Upstart for entrepreneurs. OnVLP has embedded within both of these programs. 100% of entrepreneurs who go through the Upstart program receive a free legal consultation with OnVLP regarding legal rights and responsibilities related to small businesses. Also, 100% of participants in the WorkTrain Program receive information regarding the collateral consequences that criminal convictions might have on their employability, especially in the health sector. OnVLP then provides free reentry legal assistance to all participants who have criminal records. By embedding ourselves OnVLP is ensuring that the participants in these programs have the tools needed to succeed.

OnVLP’s most significant collaboration with a legal services provider is with Hiscock Legal Aid Society (HLA), with which OnVLP shares an immigration grant. OnVLP 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). OnVLP’s uncontested divorce program only takes clients that are conflicted out of HLA, and so on.
OnVLP had a roster of 770 volunteers. OnVLP’s pro bono attorneys provided 2,345 hours of service, valued at over $700,00. OnVLP’s panel of 242 law student volunteers provided 1,366 hours of service, and other volunteers provided 445 hours of pro bono service.

OnVLP has a roster of 462 attorneys who volunteer to provide pro bono legal service and staff all of OnVLP’s programs. These attorneys represent the diversity of the legal community in the CNY region, with attorneys from firms with over a hundred attorneys down to just one attorney, from the public sector and also from legal services and public interest organizations. Their diverse knowledge and interests are what makes OnVLP programming so strong. OnVLP employees recruits, trains, and coordinates the participation of volunteer attorneys, who staff all programs. 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 in the form of consultations, and provide legal education in the community.

OnVLP is committed to fostering pro bono commitment in the next generation of lawyers, and incorporates law student volunteers into all aspects of programming. Law student volunteers assist with intake and shadow attorneys during their meetings with the clients in eviction defense, immigration, and community-based clinics, and have played a critical role in the expansion of court-based clinics. They assist with preparation of divorce petitions and case management and with input of client data into the client management system. Law student interns with a student practice order represent clients in landlord tenant court under the supervision of OnVLP staff. In addition, OnVLP formally participates in Syracuse University’s Externship Program throughout the year and hosts a Cornell Law School students as well.

Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

- 770 volunteers
- 2,345 hours of service
- 2,345 hours of service
- 1,366 hours of service
- 445 hours of pro bono service

OnVLP’s roster includes:
- 462 attorneys
- 242 law student volunteers
- 66 other volunteers

Sources Of Funding

- IOLA Grant: $55,000
- Foundations: $115,816
- State Funding: $373,160
- City & County Funding: $157,638
- Other: $361,985
- TOTAL: $1,063,599

Pro Bono Statistics

- Attorneys: 462 Volunteers, 2,345 Hours
- Law Students: 242 Volunteers, 1,366 Hours
- Other Volunteers: 66 Volunteers, 445 Hours