Overview of Achievements

In the 2021-22 year, Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, Inc. (VLP) conducted 4,839 intakes, resulting in 2,404 closed individual cases, benefiting 5,723 people in civil legal issues affecting the essentials of life, including housing, family, elder and divorce law, and provided legal assistance in 71 group cases, supporting low-income entrepreneurs and nonprofits serving low-income individuals. VLP provided referrals to other legal and social services to 2,027 individuals. Overall, VLP’s panel of over 800 pro bono volunteers provided over 5,100 hours of service. VLP’s services continue to take pandemic precautions into account, and approximately 90% of intakes took place online or telephonically (whereas prior to the pandemic over 70% of intakes took place in person at legal clinics in the community).

Tenants’ rights have been a major focus – VLP ran a daily tenants’ rights clinic via telephone, staffed by pro bono volunteers, and in doing so kept a panel of 52 attorneys actively engaged in tenants rights. At the same time, VLP staff attended court virtually, ensuring that tenants that were brought for eviction were protected. These programs served 736 families, and closed 651 cases benefiting 1,650 individuals. In addition, the team provided 18 community education sessions that reached over 328 community members.

The past year also involved constant changes to the immigration system, and the major humanitarian disaster that resulted in an influx of individuals from Afghanistan after the take over of the Taliban led to 600 Afghan evacuees urgently requiring assistance. VLP’s immigration team held a series of community and volunteer trainings that resulted in the recruitment of 193 volunteers. Already VLP held two legal screening clinics for Afghan arrivals with many more to come, and a plan to help pro bono attorneys provide comprehensive asylum representation. The immigration program closed 200 cases, benefiting 478 community members.

### Population Served:

**General Low Income Population**

### Area Served:

**Central region of New York State**

### Total IOLA Grant:

$100,000

### Staffing Full Time Equivalents:

- **Total Staff:** 15.83
- **Lawyers:** 7.16
- **Paralegals:** 6.40
- **Other:** 2.27
Overview of Achievements

VLP’s LGBT Rights program continued with a hybrid service model, working closely with community partners across the state to provide transgender name change clinics. The program closed 279 cases, including 201 transgender name changes, and saved clients over $35,000 in waived filing fees. In partnership with Cornell Law School and Syracuse University College of Law, 16 law students volunteered 2,658 hours serving these clients.

VLP’s Family Court Clinic and Divorce Program, which assists unrepresented litigants closed 476 cases. The Surrogate’s Court Clinic was able to move from fully remote to a hybrid model. Overall, the Surrogate’s Court, Hospital Clinic, and Wills programs served 122 people. Our community-based Talk to a Lawyer clinics also returned to in-person service in September, and served 178 people before the year end.

VLP’s Community Economic Opportunity Programs, focusing on providing pathways out of poverty, included our Debt Defense program which closed 106 cases and saved debtors $536,669 this year. VLP’s low-income small business and nonprofit program served 81 clients. VLP’s reentry program, which removes barriers to employment caused by criminal records, worked closely with programs focused on providing low-income community members of color pathways into the trades and health professions, and closed 48 cases.

VLP provided community legal trainings to over 1,000 individuals and VLP brochures, palm cards and materials were circulated to an additional 12,415 people.

Direct Legal Services: Cases

Housing:
John B and his wife both lost their jobs during Covid and found themselves unable to pay rent. Their landlord filed a nonpayment eviction case in late 2020, and they connected with us in January 2021. They were scared and afraid of becoming homeless with their three children. The laws were rapidly changing and they didn't understand their rights. We helped them to file Tenant Hardship Declarations to assert their rights, and helped them navigate and request multiple court adjournments in spite of the landlord's protests. We advised them of their rights to seek emergency rental assistance and other help with their back rent. In October we secured confirmation that they had received help with the back rent. After over 10 months, the landlord acknowledged receipt of payment and withdrew the case. They are no longer facing the threat of homelessness. Their 3 children were able to continue their schooling and have a stable home during this pandemic.
Direct Legal Services: Cases

Immigration:
VLP’s immigration program succeeded in helping a victim of labor trafficking to obtain pro bono representation and immigration and employment relief. The client came to VLP in 2019 seeking help as he was trapped in an exploitative and abusive employment situation that was unsafe, and was affecting his physical, mental and financial well-being. The client’s immigration status was tied to the employment, and the company threatened that he would lose immigration status and potentially face deportation if he fought for his rights. A law school clinic team, a local pro bono attorney, and VLP staff and interns, worked together for two years on behalf of this client. The client was able to escape the employment situation, find a safe and stable living situation, and eventual other employment. The pro bono attorney helped the client to receive a financial settlement from his former employer, and in February of 2022 the client received notice that his T nonimmigrant status, immigration relief for victims of human trafficking, had been approved. The client will now be able to remain in the United States in stability and safety.

5,723 people benefitted from 2,407 legal cases closed

Cases by Legal Problem Area

- Housing 30%
- Family 24%
- Miscellaneous 24%
- Immigration 8%
- Individual Rights 5%
- Consumer / Finance 5%
- Employment 3%
- Other 1%
- Miscellaneous 24%
Other 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. In total, VLP provided 54 community legal education sessions, reaching 1,073 individuals, and distributed legal education brochures and flyers to 12,415 individuals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of People who Benefitted from Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13,611 People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation
Other Services: Technology and Other Innovations

VLP continued to fine-tune the technology upgrades that we completed last fiscal year, including building in a system for syncing ongoing updates regarding case status from LegalServer to Sharepoint.

We have begun using unique Sharepoint Sites with special permissions to facilitate collaboration with outside organizations on shared projects. For example, our Immigration Program now shares an Immigration Legal Sharepoint site with the Immigration Team for Hiscock Legal Aid, where we are able to share resources, forms, and grant reporting documents. We are also able to track client status for the high-volume Afghan response clinics and high-volume consultation days in this folder (all clients sign a release to allow both agencies access to their files). We have set up similar sites with each of our partner refugee resettlement agencies, which they are using to transmit client intake forms and supporting documents, significantly streamlining our intake process.

Other Services: Trainings

Staff are encouraged to engage in professional development, and a professional development plan is part of regular supervision. 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. VLP provides trainings to staff during regular staff meetings.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) continues to be a major focus of professional development for staff and volunteers. The Board of Directors participated in a 2-part DEI training, and then worked principles from the training into our Strategic Plan, including the plan to create a Board Equity and Anti-Oppression Committee. Towards the end of the year we kicked off a 7-part DEI training for staff, which will continue into the coming year.

VLP also provides CLE trainings throughout the year to volunteers, and makes those trainings available to staff, board and volunteers. We continue to include DEI components into all substantive law trainings that we provide.
Impact Cases

VLP’s Economic Opportunity programs represent groups nonprofits and low-income small businesses, with a particular focus on assisting businesses owned by people of color. This year we expanded the program in collaboration with Syracuse Urban Partnership and Centerstate CEO (our regional chamber of commerce). Two client narratives are as follows:

A New American woman from an African country approached VLP for help with her popular restaurant that she has been operating as a d/b/a for a few years. VLP’s attorney explained that setting up a business entity is a way for the owner to substantially limit her personal risks from bad luck (or debts) that may affect her business. We counseled the client on the benefits of having a business entity for protection, and how to properly maintain it. In the end, we set up an LLC for the client so that she is protected going forward.

Another New American from an African country who has a food service company had relocated from Ohio to New York State. First, we tried to transfer her existing business entity and register it as a “foreign corporation” in New York. But the Ohio State paperwork was not accepted by New York’s Secretary of State. So we then established a New York LLC for her protection from personal liability for debts of the business. We also helped this business owner develop sales contracts, consulting contracts, employment forms, a custom operating agreement for her business that will permit her to take in future investors, or offer profit sharing to her future employees.

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.
Significant Collaborations

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, Antitrafficking Coalitions in the North Country, Migrant Farmworker Coalitions, 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 one immigration program and work together on all aspects of service. VLP and HLA together attempt to achieve representation of 100% of clients who appear in landlord-tenant court in Syracuse City Court. VLP’s divorce program only takes clients that are conflicted out of HLA. 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.

Sources of Funding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Funding</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IOLA Grant</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal Funding</td>
<td>$175,560</td>
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<tr>
<td>City and County Funding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foundations</td>
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<td>State Funding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>$155,619</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,910,653</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sources of funding are distributed as follows:
- **State Funding** (44%)
- **Foundations** (24%)
- **Federal Funding** (9%)
- **City and County Funding** (8%)
- **Other** (5%)

In total, the funding amounts to $1,910,653.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

VLP has a roster of over 800 volunteers. VLP’s pro bono panel provided 5,150 hours of pro bono service this year. The ongoing effects of the pandemic continued to make pro bono engagement challenging, with illness and COVID exposure resulting in many last-minute cancellations. Volunteers served in all VLP programs, and represented clients in 43% of the cases that VLP closed. VLP actively engages law students as well, who assist with intake, drafting client documents, research and even practice under student practice orders.

This year we held 13 CLE training sessions that were attended by 682 volunteers. These trainings are used to keep people up with the law and also recruit new volunteers. One particularly successful recruitment effort has been with regard to responding to the legal needs of Afghan arrivals. Syracuse has received over 600 Afghan arrivals, the majority of whom have arrived with humanitarian parole status, and for whom the only route to permanency at this point is asylum. Knowing that each asylum case can take 50 to 100 hours to prepare, and that we do not have anywhere near enough immigration legal aid attorneys to meet the need, VLP began a significant recruitment effort.

On February 17, 2022, staff from VLP and Northside CYO/Catholic Charities provided a CLE training on Pro Bono Representation of Afghan Evacuees in CNY. This was a lunchtime Zoom training that provided background on the Afghan evacuees that have arrived in Central New York, discussed their temporary legal immigration status, and potential options for permanent legal immigration status in the United States. This training was recorded, and it was mandatory for volunteers to watch the training prior to assisting at a clinic or handling a case for direct representation. Over 100 people joined for the training. Then, on March 11, 2022, HLA and VLP attorneys held a CLE training on “Asylum 101” for pro bono attorney law students and volunteers who had volunteered to help with the Afghan evacuee legal response. This training was recorded, and it was mandatory for volunteers to watch the training prior to assisting at a clinic or handling a case for direct representation. 62 people watched it live, and another 72 have watched it since. In total we had 193 volunteers (36 of whom are lawyers) sign up to help with the effort.

518 Attorneys volunteered 794 hours

321 Law Students volunteered 4,366 hours

15 Other Volunteers volunteered 19 hours