My Sisters Place
2021-2022

Overview of Achievements

The Center for Legal Services (CLS) continues to stand strong in the face of the many challenges presented during the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic. We are grateful that during the reporting period many of our clients and almost all our staff are fully vaccinated and are managing their lives in a more informed and less fearful manner than at the start of the pandemic. We at My Sisters’ Place (MSP) have adapted our legal practice to the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic and are prepared to serve our clients in a flexible, trauma informed environment ranging from remote client meetings to occasional in person meetings. What we have learned over the course of the reporting period is that clients’ legal needs have increased while resources in our community are not distributed equally among those with the greatest need. In order to meet the needs of our clients, the CLS staff have all returned to in person work on a hybrid schedule at our three office locations in White Plains, Yonkers, and Mount Vernon. We are prepared to serve clients either in person, through telehealth or by phone. Prior to the pandemic most of MSP’s legal clients were served in person, however over the course of the last two years, client meetings are mainly conducted by phone. Although MSP offers a secure telehealth platform for client meetings, we have found that many clients still prefer meetings by phone. This may be because clients are not in a comfortable place for video calls or perhaps are afraid that someone might be recording them or watching them on video.

MSP serves victims of gender-based violence from many diverse communities across Westchester County, NY. Many of those who are victimized are members of groups that have historically been oppressed, marginalized, or silenced – including individuals with disabilities, members of LGBTQ communities, and those who have been trafficked – with crimes against these groups often going undetected or underreported. The area has a reputation for affluence but, in reality, wealth is deeply concentrated, and extremely high costs of housing, transit, healthcare, and contribute to a high percentage of cost-burdened households. Significantly, during the reporting we saved clients over $100,000 in fees waived for filing immigration applications.

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

Area Served: Westchester County

Total IOLA Grant: $87,500

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:
- Total Staff: 12.8
- Lawyers: 8
- Paralegals: 4.8
Direct Legal Services: Cases

Two years into the pandemic, we are finally in a place that is not necessarily a “return to normal”, but we are back to providing a high level of legal services to our clients with the reopening of some Immigration and Family Courts as well as some small, but significant progress in how USCIS is processing U-Visa applications.

We are pleased to report that we recently had two Asylum applications granted to clients fleeing domestic violence in their home countries. Both Asylum cases were in-person hearings in the Immigration Court, and in both cases the judge ruled in our clients favor from the bench. These decisions are significant as they mark the first Asylum cases, we have won in Immigration court for victims of gender-based violence deemed to be a “particular social group” for purposes of granting asylum. The two asylum seekers and one child are now eligible to apply for green cards, and we anticipate filing those applications shortly. This positive outcome has yielded lifelong benefits and safety to our clients, and we anticipate equally positive results for our future asylum-seeking clients.

Another significant development for our immigration clients is the establishment by USCIS of the “Bona Fide Determination” for U-Visa applications. In general, our U-Visa applications take 5-6 years to be adjudicated. During this time, our clients are not authorized to work and are not eligible for public health benefits.
Direct Legal Services: Cases

Early in 2021, USCIS announced that it would process U-Visa applications more quickly by making a Bona Fide Determination on applications that appeared to be in order, but for the fact that a U-Visa was not yet available. There are only 10,000 U-Visas available each year, resulting in an unfathomable backlog of applications for review. At USCIS, the backlog for all immigration applications has surged from 5.7 million applications at the end of FY 2019 to about 9.5 million as of February 2022. USCIS has now started to make Bona Fide Determinations for our U-Visa clients for applications filed in 2017. Although the Bona Fide Determination does not grant immigration status, it does result in the issuance of a 4-year work permit for the client which can be life altering during the time that our clients are waiting for full adjudication of their applications. We have received 5 Bona Fide determinations. Progress at USCIS is slow, but for these clients they may now work with authorization allowing them to receive fair pay in safer job conditions. Issuance of a work permit also qualifies our clients for social security cards allowing them to file taxes and receive public health benefits in most cases.

In the Family Law Unit, we continued our representation of a mother on a violation of a support order entered in 2008 for one child. Although the court ordered the biological father to pay $1841.49 monthly, he paid little to no support and as of the filing the petition, owed over $271,000 in arrears. Our attorney prepared for the fact-finding hearing by making discovery requests and researched the father’s educational history, employment history, and his extensive travel history which included multiple trips to Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Caribbean.

In February 2021 after multiple appearances, a fact-finding hearing was conducted on our client’s violation petition. At the conclusion of the hearing, a willful violation finding was made by the Support Magistrate who noted that the arrears now exceeded $277,807.00. The Support Magistrate referred the case to a Judge for confirmation of the findings and made a recommendation for incarceration of the biological father for up to 6 months. Faced with the prospect of incarceration, the biological father has made payments of close to $70,000.00 and more recently agreed to pay $3000 monthly.

Our remote services delivery options include a telehealth platform whereby clients can meet with CLS staff securely and safely via video conferencing. In addition, we provide all client services, including intakes, consultations, brief legal services, and client meetings via telephone which is our clients’ preferred method of communication at the present time.
Other Services: Overview

The CLS conducted 27 Community Presentations to 741 attendees during the reporting period. We partnered with the Human Trafficking Department for a presentation to Rising Ground, and most notably conducted 6 presentations to the entire Peekskill Police Department as part of its annual in-service training. Community Presentations were also made to the following groups: White Plains Family Justice Center, New York Bar Foundation, SAAVE, Clifford Chance, Salvation Army, Scales of Justice, Samaritan House Women’s Shelter, Metropolitan Blac Bar Association, Attorney Emeritus Program, Yonkers Public Schools, and Westchester Medical Center. For the presentations that were conducted in person we distributed our brochures, and for the virtual presentations we sent electronic versions of our brochures.

We conducted both in person and virtual presentations to the Community in Spanish and English. With the pandemic still raging on, many of our presentations remained virtual but we managed to organize some in person presentations as vaccination rates rose. The presentations were well received. While all the community presentations are impactful, one that stood out was the community presentation by our lone Spanish speaking Family Law attorney. She completed this presentation within a short time after joining the CLS and was so engaging that all the participants were glued to their seats in rapt attention. This highlighted for us how important it is to provide bridges such as language access so that the community can know we are an ally, here serve.

We also continued our online client assistance through LawHelpNY.org outlining our legal services, 24-hour hotline and emergency shelter services.

| Number of People who Benefitted from Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Community Legal Education       | 1,719            |
| Pro Se Assistance               | 75               |

1,794 People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation
Other Services: Trainings

CLS staff receive regular training from Westchester Medical Center (WMC) SAAVE (Sexual Assault, Abuse and Victim’s Empowerment) program. This training allows CLS staff to provide appropriate advocacy to clients who have recently experienced sexual assault, in a trauma-informed and time-sensitive manner, including understanding how and when to access WMC’s certified Forensic Acute Care Team (FACT) to provide medical care and collect forensic evidence within 96 hours of an assault – if doing so will support a victim’s healing and access to justice.

The CLS continued to build on the practice of cross training the Bilingual Paralegal Advocates. One way that was done this reporting period was when the Family Law attorneys began training the bilingual advocates on the steps to complete Financial Disclosure affidavits for child support hearings. The advocates were able to assist in gathering the supporting financial documents such as paystubs, W2s, banks statements and so on.

Our attorneys are encouraged to attend external Continuing Legal Education courses to improve the service provided to our clients, build substantive knowledge and procedural skills as well as earn credits towards their bi-annual attorney registration. Externally, our attorneys participated in CLE New York State Academy of Trial Attorneys, The Family Law Section of the Metropolitan Bar Association, Bronx Family Court Bar Association, as well as several Westchester County and Office of Victims’ Services offerings. All CLS staff have full access to Practicing Law Institute training and CLE opportunities. Our attorney staff also have access to City Bar Association, ASISTA, Office on Violence Against Women and American Immigration Lawyers Association trainings.

We train staff and our Board to deepen their understanding of intersectionality, racism, heterosexism, harmful gender stereotypes, ableism, classism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and the importance of language access. Our team is continually being deployed in new ways to meet the evolving needs of our clients through expanded outreach, new use of technology, a hybrid model of program delivery, and the development of new and enhanced community partnerships. Mandatory internal trainings for all MSP staff include Dynamics of Domestic Violence, Confidentiality, Safety Planning, Mandatory Reporting, Suicide Prevention, Intersectionality, and Intimate Partner Violence in the LGBTQ+ community.
Other Services: Technology and Other Innovations

Covid19 forced MSP and the CLS to pivot to a remote platform to assist clients. One positive development was the addition of voice over IP phones with the options to download the features on our laptops and personal cell phone. Another feature of our new phone system is the ability of staff to text clients. Other positive developments prompted by the need to provide services remotely included MSP’s modernization of its existing digital case management systems, providing for greater efficiency in our client services. Utilizing pandemic-related government funding, MSP attorneys and advocates were equipped with new laptops, printers, and scanners, making the task of working from home far less challenging. We also implemented trainings that improved technological fluency for staff and clients alike. These advances will enable MSP staff to continue to provide uninterrupted access to our services for clients throughout these uncertain times.

Significant Collaborations

The CLS strives to create and maintain strong partnerships with our fellow legal service providers in Westchester County and have expanded our partnerships with private bar associations during the reporting period. In addition, we value the strong collaborations that we have with community-based organizations and the work they do to support our clients.

Our most notable collaboration this year has been with the Domestic Violence High Risk Team (DVHRT). We collaborate with the White Plains Police Department (WPPD) to elevate the response to victims at high risk of homicide through screening under the Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP). When a high-risk is indicated, officers call MSP’s 24-hour hotline from the scene with the victim by their side. The (DVHRT) is a county-wide initiative, that like our partnership with WPPD, trains police to identify high risk cases and connect victims to specialized support. The program was launched in the Fall of 2020 and cases were referred to MSP. In 2021, the number of police departments that were participating and completed the training grew significantly, and by the close of the reporting period, our Family Law practice saw a significant increase in the number of referrals for Family Court legal services. The Family Law Unit is adjusting to the influx of new cases by assigning a designated paralegal to screen the referrals, schedule intakes, consultations and update our case management database.
We continue to work closely with partner agencies when referring cases and ascertaining which agencies have capacity to accept new cases. These close relationships allow us to make “warm introductions” when making referrals so that we can assure clients that will be referred to a known and trusted associate.

In making referrals, we work closely with Pace Family Justice Center, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, Family Justice Center, Hope’s Door, Center for Safety and Change, Make the Road, NY, Neighbors Link, Legal Aid Society and Her Justice.

We meet with colleagues at regularly scheduled meetings with the Westchester County DV Council, Hudson Valley Immigration Legal Service Providers, and the Westchester Anti-Trafficking Task Force. CLS attorneys are affiliated with several professional organizations including Westchester Women’s’ Bar Association, Metropolitan Black Bar Association, Non-Profit Westchester, Westchester Women’s Agenda. Our partnerships with community organizations continue to sustain our clients with educational opportunities and much needed in-kind donations. A new community organization partnership this year is with Tina’s Wish providing webinars to clients on women’s health issues. Our long-time partnerships with The Sharing Shelf and 914 Cares ensure that the children of our clients receive stylish gently worn clothing each season to wear to school. Two of our attorneys participated in the year-long Her Honor Mentoring program meeting weekly with a high school senior from an underserved community.

### Significant Collaborations

Sources of Funding

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<th>Source</th>
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<td>IOLA Grant</td>
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Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

We are fortunate to continue a long-standing relationship with a New York City law firm, recruiting, training, and deploying pro bono opportunities. Our training and assignment opportunities are posted on the law firms Pro Bono Opportunity software, and then we work directly with pro bono volunteers to schedule training and distribution of assignments. In January of 2021 we accepted a new pro bono volunteer from the New York State Attorney Emeritus Program (“AEP”) which designed to facilitate pro bono services by senior attorneys. The pro bono volunteer is participating in training and will soon be assigned a U-Visa case.

During the reporting period we trained 59 pro bono volunteers in Naturalization, Adjustment of Status, and U Visa applications. Trainings took place as follows:

- 3 pro bono attorneys participated in U Visa training on May 4, 2021.
- 39 law firm summer associates were trained in Adjustment of Status applications on June 11, 2021.
- 11 private law firm associates were trained in Naturalization applications on December 10, 2021.
- 6 law firm associates were trained in U Visa applications on January 21, 2022.
- 39 summer associates worked on 19 Adjustment of Status applications (green card) cases[1] including Employment Authorization applications and Fee Waiver applications.
- 4 pro bono attorneys worked on 3 U-Visa applications.
- 13 pro bono attorneys worked on 8 Naturalization applications.

We gladly welcomed one of the summer associates who attends Fordham Law School as a fall extern. This was a valuable opportunity for the intern to work closely with an MSP attorney on two asylum cases. The extern contributed to the client trial preparation and attended a hearing in which our client was granted asylum.

[1] U-Visa recipients are eligible to file for Adjustment of Status (green card) after 3 years.

**21 Attorneys volunteered 496 hours**

**39 Law Students volunteered 897 hours**