Unity House of Troy  
2021-2022

Overview of Achievements

During this reporting period, we closed 559 cases of which 535 were victims of domestic violence. The primary target populations are victims of domestic violence and County residents of lower income. Low-income clients realized significant monetary benefits.

We obtained back awards of $62,125.79 in child support, $820 in maintenance and $18,750 in equitable distribution of assets for clients. Additionally, we obtained $11,281.45 of monthly child support benefits and $1,108.96 of monthly maintenance payments for clients. Increased access to justice was obtained for 15 low-income residents of Hoosick Falls through a partnership with OCA.

During this reporting period, the need for divorces has been greater than usual. The JCLS attorney has taken on more divorce cases but this has affected the overall cases closed number, as these cases typically take longer to resolve, often over a year’s time. Divorces are particularly critical to victims of domestic violence who are trying to escape abuse. Often victims remain trapped in marriages due to lack of legal resources to assist with a divorce or to assist in equitable distribution. We have seen an increasing need for representation in this area, so much so that we sought and received funding for a full time attorney to conduct divorces.

Population Served: General Low Income Population

Area Served: Rensselaer County

Total IOLA Grant: $60,000

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:
- Total Staff: 4.89
- Lawyers: 2.20
- Paralegals: 2.00
- Other: 0.69
Direct Legal Services: Cases

The first example of a typical case involves a client who received legal assistance with a Family case that involved a divorce. Client immigrated to the US upon her engagement to a US citizen she met online. Shortly after they married, she began to endure physical and mental abuse at the hands of her husband. He threatened her with deportation if she tried to go to the police. He also demanded that it was “her job” to give him a child so she underwent several rounds of fertility treatments. When she was unable to conceive, the husband started pursuing other women and told the client she could return to her country to live as his parents’ maid.

The client fled the marital residence and sought UHLP assistance to obtain a divorce. Her abuser responded by cutting off her access to all joint finances, and then filed a counterclaim to annul the marriage, which posed a significant threat to her conditional permanent residency status.

We were able to recover the client’s personal belongings from the marital residence. We also worked with two fertility clinics to help the client donate her frozen embryos. We conferred with a private immigration attorney to help her apply for permanent residency status for herself and her son. We ultimately were able to achieve a settlement agreement without a trial whereby the abuser withdrew his annulment claim and paid the client nearly $40,000 in combined spousal support and a distributive award. With this amount of money, she was able to afford new housing and pay her outstanding immigration attorney’s fees and medical bills.
Another example of a typical case is a client who received legal assistance for a Housing matter that involved an eviction proceeding. After obtaining an Order of Protection against her abuser, which entailed a full-stay away, client found temporary relief in being able to reside alone in her residence. However, she was soon served with a notice of eviction. Uncertain of where to go, how to afford it or how to negotiate taking her personal property from the home without violating the Order of Protection, the client came to UHLP for assistance. We convinced the landlord to afford the client additional time to vacate the premises and discontinue the eviction proceeding. We also obtained a 4-figure settlement payment, which the client used towards a security deposit on new housing, and negotiated the transfer of specific personal property from the residence to help furnish her new residence. The attorney was present the day the client moved out to ensure the client felt safe and participated in the walk-through inspection to assess any damages and ensured the client received her settlement fee in-full.

Other Services: Overview

Through a partnership with OCA, we were able to provide 15 individuals with education and assistance. A Hoosick Falls resident asked for assistance completing claim forms that would allow them to receive a settlement related to a class action lawsuit. The lawsuit arose out of claims that various companies contaminated the aquifer beneath Hoosick Falls with perfluorooctanoic acid, commonly referred to as PFOA. In working with this woman, UHLP learned that others in the community were also looking for assistance and education on their rights. In response and in partnership with OCA, the UHLP attorney and paralegal conducted three 4-hour clinics inviting residents to come to the local library or Armory in order to determine their eligibility as a settlement class member and/or to receive assistance completing and submitting claim forms that would allow them to receive a portion of the class action settlement. Through this program, we were able to assist 15 individuals.

A total of 265 brochures were distributed through all Unity House programs and through our collaborative partners.

700 People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation
Other Services: Technology and Other Innovations

This year we implemented the Empower database, which has dramatically improved our ability to track data and manage cases. For the past couple years, we have searched for a database that would work for us, as we have a very complicated grant funding structure with multiple grant reporting requirements. Last fall we converted to Empower, which has been a good transition for us so far. It is a much more flexible database designed to manage multiple grant reporting parameters while also providing a way to manage client information in a readily accessible web based platform. We are still learning how to use all of the features available but so far, it is making data collection and reporting much easier for staff.

Other Services: Trainings

We believe that training is very important for all of our attorneys. Each one regularly engages in a variety of training, both skills-based and related to domestic violence and trauma informed care practices. Some examples of trainings attended are Matrimonial Law Basics, Matrimonial and Family Law Update 2021, National Immigrant Women’s Advocacy Project Webinar, Matrimonial Courtroom Evidence, Evidence and Trial Tactics in Article 6 Proceedings, COVID-19 Impacts on Domestic Violence Victims, Trauma Informed Care for Domestic Violence Victims, and the Power of a Woman’s Voice.

Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

UHLP had an Albany Law School intern work with us during the Summer 2021. The intern took charge of our file destruction project related to closed case files from eight or more years ago. The Intern searched for former clients on our system, the web and Lexis, prepared letters advising these former clients that their files were still being held at our offices, and offered them the option to come pick up their old files or allow us to destroy them. This was very helpful to our law practice, as this task had fallen very far behind. The intern also reviewed client case files, learned about domestic violence and trauma informed care, and observed Family Court proceedings.

1 Law Student volunteered 59 hours
Significant Collaborations

UHLP benefits from several collaborations that are part of the Domestic Violence Services program. These include a partnership with the Troy Police, Hoosick Falls Police, District Attorney’s office, and probation. We receive many referrals from our collaborative partners on an on-going basis. Through a collaboration with the Troy Police, UHLP often works with a dedicated DV detective to file Domestic Incident Reports and pursue criminal charges. The District Attorney’s office is another source of many referrals from criminal cases wherein the victim also needs family court assistance.

We collaborated with Albany Law School to provide experience for law students in the family violence clinic. Working closely with the Albany Law professor, students assisted with Family Court petition drafting, court preparation, divorce pleadings and discovery. They also observed virtual court proceedings. We believe this is an important project because it gives law students real experience in understanding what it means to represent a victim of domestic violence as well as what it means to do so in a trauma informed manner.

Sources of Funding

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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IOLA Grant</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>City and County Funding</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Funding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal Funding</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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- Fundraising: 25%
- IOLA: 13%
- State: 18%
- City: 6%
- Federal: 38%