

MY SISTERS' PLACE

**2023 – 2024
Report**

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

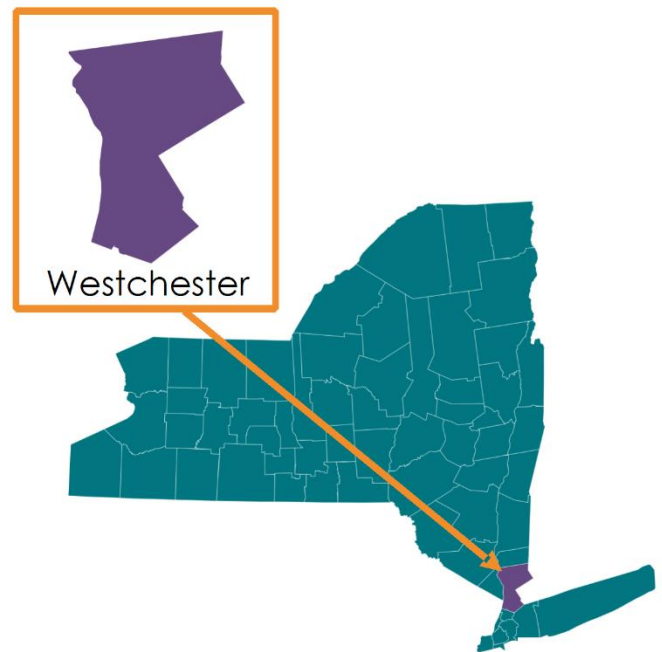
We have experienced many changes and growth within the past year at My Sisters' Place (MSP). Most notably, our long serving CEO Karen Cheeks-Lomax left the agency in January. In honor of her long-time commitment to MSP we have renamed our legal center to The Karen Cheeks-Lomax Center for Legal Services (KCL-CLS). We are pleased to announce that Denise Durham Williams has been named as the new CEO of My Sisters' Place, and we look forward to her leadership and guidance.

We also said goodbye to our Managing Attorney of Immigration, Jessica Richardson, who has moved on to become Executive Director of a small immigration non-profit in Connecticut. Javeria Ahmed, our Senior Attorney for Immigration, has accepted a position with the Immigrant Justice Center.

We are thrilled to announce that Gillian Menza will be joining MSP as the new Managing Attorney of the Immigration Unit. Gillian is fluent in Spanish and has significant immigration and management experience from her work at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, and most recently at The Door working with detained migrant youth.

We are also thrilled to announce that Rachel Cole has filled the Family Law attorney position in the Mt. Vernon office. Ms. Cole is a recent law school graduate who will be representing clients in the Westchester County Family Courts.

We are pleased to have the opportunity for an internal promotion for Amy Marques, who is now the Senior Immigration Attorney. All five of our paralegal advocates are bi-lingual Spanish speakers and we have been fortunate to add a designated Intake Specialist to our staff who is also a native Spanish speaker.



Service Area: Westchester

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

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:
Total Staff: 17 Lawyers: 9
Paralegals: 8

The pandemic years taught us to appreciate change and to view it as an opportunity rather than a negative, and we are excited to see what the future of our legal department will hold as we bring on new staff and maximize their contributions to the unit. The KCL-CLS continues to operate on a hybrid schedule in all three of its office locations. This schedule ensures sufficient office coverage while maximizing the benefits of working from home for our staff.

We are particularly proud of our staff this year who have all survived working through a pandemic and have adjusted to and embraced a new approach to the practice of law. Our family law attorneys have adapted to appearing in virtual and in-person court conferences and hearings as each Family Court Judge sets the rules of their courtroom.

Attorneys have learned to support clients in a variety of scenarios as the way a client feels when appearing in person and facing an adverse party and Judge is different than how they feel when appearing with an attorney on a video platform. The family law unit pulled together as a team this year covering daily hearings in all three Westchester County Family Courts, continuing with consultations, in addition to their daily work, while we searched for a new family law attorney.

Our immigration unit met its goal of having each attorney handle an individual hearing in the Immigration Court. Individual hearings require enormous trial preparation including brief writing, document gathering, as well as client and witness preparation. We had three favorable rulings from the bench, and we are waiting for a ruling on one other matter.

The immigration unit transitioned to a new case management system this year, and the staff continue to attend trainings as they learn to maximize the value of this new technology. Two of our paralegals are seeking DOJ accreditation to further maximize our legal services to clients. One of our paralegals is already DOJ accredited.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

The KCL-CLS limits its practice to family law and immigration services. Due to the fast pace and safety risks involved for our family law clients, our family law unit will often see clients first and then refer them to the immigration unit for additional services. We are fortunate to have a designated Legal Intake Specialist who screens all callers for eligibility, schedules consultations for attorneys, arranges interpreters and collects client documents. Our Consultation calendar remains open, and we continue to conduct Legal Advice and Counsel Clinics two days per month for callers seeking more immediate advice and who do not want to wait an extended period of time for a Consultation.

Family Law Unit

In addition to the Legal Advice and Counsel Clinics, the Family Law Unit continues to have designated slots for the Domestic Violence High Risk Team/Lethal Assessment Program referrals (DVHRT/LAP). Due to the high-risk nature of these referrals, it is imperative that these individuals receive legal advice and/or representation immediately. The Managing Attorney for the Family Law Unit also attends Quarterly Meetings with the police departments to ensure that the referral process is running smoothly so that these individuals are receiving the necessary services in a timely manner.

3,852

people
benefited
from

963

legal cases
closed

One of the cases closed this year was a DVHRT/LAP referral. The client sought our services after filing a family offense petition where she was granted a complete stay away Temporary Order of Protection (TOP), ex parte, on behalf of herself and her daughter. After being retained, we appeared for an initial court appearance where the Referee advised the Respondent of the terms of the TOP. After appearing, the Respondent refused to follow the TOP, stating that nothing would stop him, and he continuously harassed the client. In response, our client had no choice but to call the police, and we filed multiple violations with the Court. The matter

was ultimately referred to a Family Court Judge and the Respondent failed to appear, causing the Judge to set the matter for an inquest. The client was understandably nervous and feared having to testify.

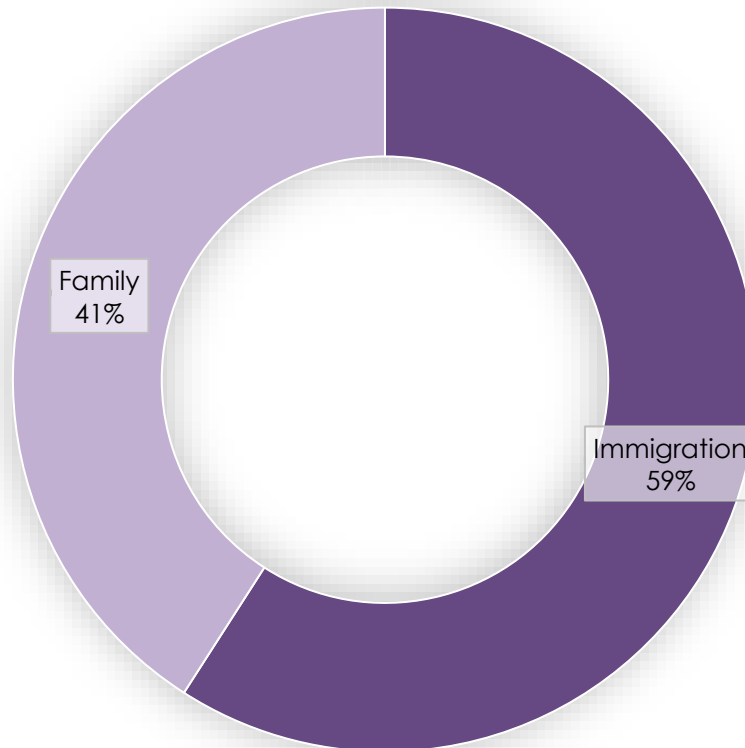
As a team, we prepared the client for the inquest proceeding by setting up multiple prep-sessions using an interpreter to simulate the Court experience. Although reliving the events was difficult, our extensive prep-sessions diminished the fear and anxiety she was experiencing, and the client then felt more comfortable testifying about her traumatic experiences with the Respondent. At the inquest proceeding, the Respondent appeared, and the Court assigned him an attorney. After consulting with his attorney, the Respondent consented to the terms of TOP and a final order was issued. We obtained a final two-year Order of Protection on behalf of the client and her daughter. It seemed clear that the Respondent was counting on intimidating our client and, if not for the time spent preparing the client and making her feel more comfortable with the process, his tactics may have worked. Instead, the client now has the documentation necessary to curtail the Respondent's behavior if he violates the Order.

Immigration Unit

Our former Managing Attorney of Immigration set and met the goal for each of our 4 immigration attorneys to represent domestic violence clients in individual hearings in the New York City Immigration Courts. Our new Managing Attorney of Immigration will continue this important work that not only benefits our clients, but also enhances attorney skill sets and encourages professional development. In addition to full client representation in Immigration Court we have provided legal advice to four asylum clients with EOIR-61 filings whereby attorneys enter a limited appearance to assist pro se individuals in proceedings before an immigration court. The recent updates to the EOIR-61 limited representation allow attorneys to assist clients in removal cases without having to provide full representation. It has increased the number of asylum applications filed within the one-year filing deadline, improved the quality of pro se applications, and allowed attorneys and non-profits to provide limited assistance while managing caseload capacity.

A major highlight for our clients and our practice is the announcement by USCIS that as of April 1, 2024, it is expanding fee waiver exemptions for humanitarian immigration applications. Most of our immigration applications including U and T Visas, VAWA, SIJS and Adjustment of Status (for approved humanitarian applications) will be exempt from paying the application fee.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



Fee waiver applications for immigrant clients have always been challenging as the evidentiary support required proof of income through tax returns that many of our immigrant clients could not file as they do not yet have social security numbers or employment authorization documents. The steep fees charged for these applications were often a barrier for many of our clients, especially those who were filing applications for themselves as well as derivative children and family members. Fee waivers were often rejected by USCIS further delaying the wait time for immigration remedies for our clients.

We have also noticed some improvement with USCIS in the issuance of Bona Fide Determinations (BFD) for our U Visa clients. While U Visas are still taking many years to process and there are only 10,000 available per year, the BFD issued within several years of filing allows clients to receive Employment Authorization Documents, a social security card, and in many cases, improved pay opportunities, and decreased instances of labor exploitation.

OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

The goal of our Community Legal Education program focuses on providing legal information to individuals, community groups, judges, and law enforcement personnel. We achieve these goals with presentations, tabling events, and participation in training forums. We have focused on Pro Se Assistance through limited representation in the Immigration Courts and most notably through our Legal Advice and Consult Clinics held twice monthly for both family law and immigration callers seeking advice. Having the opportunity to participate in person training and community events is an effective way to provide information and strengthen our connections within the community.

MSP's website contains directions for immigration clients on how to track scheduled hearings in Immigration Court through the EOIR Automated Case Information site and provides directions for immigration clients to check for updates on immigration applications through the USCIS Case Status website.

In addition, MSP's website has direct links to the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV) Know Your Rights, as well as to the New York Court providing information on safety and violence.

91

people
benefited
from
**Pro Se
Assistance**

1,519

people
benefited
from
**Community
Legal
Education**

67

people
benefited
from
**Web-Based
Assistance**

TECHNOLOGY

We continue to use Apricot software to manage our grant deliverables and the family law unit uses Apricot for case management. Supervisory staff regularly review our reporting to see where we can make improvements. MSP employs a consultant who regularly meets with us to adjust this system. In November, the immigration unit migrated its case management from Law Logix to Cerenade. Migrating a vast amount of client data was a daunting task, and we continue to adjust to a new system that is better suited to our practice and has lowered the cost of per person usage. We have recorded training courses for staff to view and continue to work on new policies to ensure consistent input of client data. All staff have laptops, headsets, printers and keyboards that allow them to work from remote locations. MSP has recently transitioned to Printix which allows us all to easily access printing capabilities when visiting any of our three offices and shelter.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

The Technology Grant of \$10,000 was much appreciated as it allowed us to purchase several items that we would not have otherwise been able to acquire for the benefit of our clients. We purchased two passport photo printer systems for our immigration practice. Each printer comes with a digital camera with a lens template, so the photo is printed in accordance with passport and USCIS regulations. The photo cutter aligns the photos, so they are cut to precision with passport and USCIS regulations. Although local stores offer passport photo services, our clients often report that they are not staffed or only open during inconvenient hours. Acquiring this equipment will save our clients the cost of getting the photos taken by an outside service and will also reduce any delay in filing applications while we wait for clients to obtain their photos and deliver them to our offices.

Our family law unit acquired 3 digital cameras to assist in gathering evidence of abuse from client's text messages. Clients struggle to print, or screen shot long text messages from abusive partners. The cameras will allow our staff to easily photograph a string of text messages and then easily upload the messages to the client file. In addition, the family law unit purchased a subscription to e-fax to assist with filing of family court documents.

Finally, we purchased 3 new laptops for our staff. The laptops are lightweight, speedy and contain sufficient memory for the document intensive work that we do. This surprise infusion of technology funding was appreciated by our staff.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

This year we are commemorating the 20th year of our pro bono partnership with the law firm of Clifford Chance. Additional pro bono partnerships this year include Ripe Law, AXA XL, DLA Piper and Proskauer. We have successfully partnered with a pro bono attorney from the New York State Attorney Emeritus Program (AEP) who has closed 7 cases this year and continues to work on multiple matters for MSP.

During the reporting period we trained 68 pro bono volunteers in Naturalization, Adjustment of Status, U Visa and Affidavit Drafting. Pro Bono Assignments include:

- 35 summer associates worked on 15 Adjustment of Status applications.
- 31 pro bono attorneys worked on cases involving Naturalization, Adjustment of Status, and U Visas.

In addition to law students and attorney pro bono volunteers we engaged 10 volunteer interpreters to assist us with clients who are not fluent English speakers.

31attorneys volunteered **473** hours**37**law students volunteered **457** hours**10**other volunteers volunteered **100** hours

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

There continues to be a tremendous need for legal services in our area, and we keep in close contact with our referral partners including Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, Pace Women’s Justice Center, Make the Road NY, Empire Justice Center, Hope’s Door, Neighbors Link, Her Justice, Sanctuary for Families, Center for Safety and Change and Catholic Charities. As we stay in contact with these service providers through referrals and regular meetings it is evident that the need continues to be greater than the available resources can support, and many of our legal services partners are not accepting new cases or providing consultations. We have recently entered into an MOU with the Community Resource Center whereby they will refer clients for legal services, and we will refer clients to them for support with ESL and Naturalization classes.

We meet regularly as members of the following groups: Hudson Valley Immigration Service Providers, Westchester County DV Council, Westchester County Anti-Trafficking Task Force (the District Attorney’s office is an active member of this group), and the Domestic Violence High Risk Team. Jessica Richardson graduated from the Leadership Westchester program and Silvia Lederman recently joined the board of the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Ida Serrano’s appointment as a Battered Women Advocacy Group representative member of the Westchester County DV Council has been extended through December 2025.

CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

\$ 2,187,312

City and County	\$ 350,711
IOLA Funding	\$ 248,875
Foundations	\$ 248,203
State Funding	\$ 1,237,523
Other	\$ 102,000

