

# **NEIGHBORHOOD LEGAL SERVICES**

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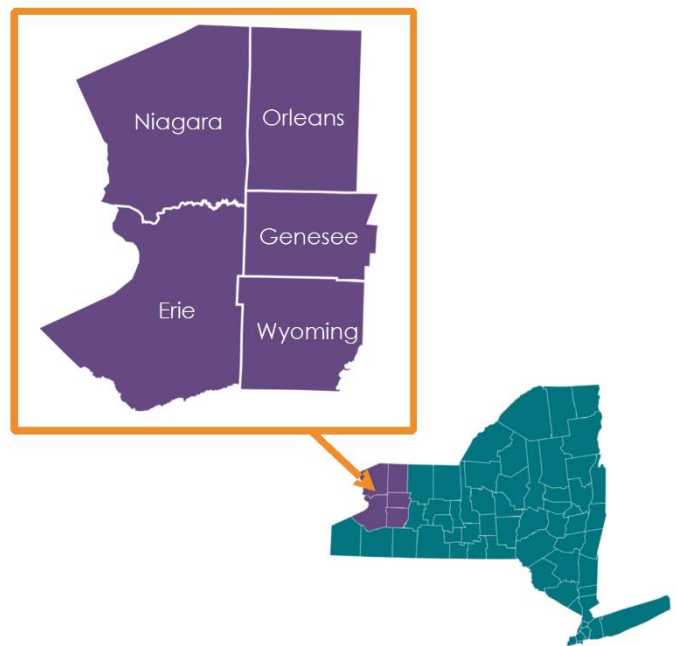
**2023 – 2024 Report**

# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

From April 1, 2023, through March 31, 2024, Neighborhood Legal Services, Inc. (NLS) screened 8,708 cases in our five-county service area. NLS’ Buffalo office, serving Erie County, opened 4,001 and closed 4,509 cases. Our Niagara Falls office, serving Niagara County, opened 528 and closed 695 cases. NLS’ new Lockport office, also serving Niagara County, opened 301 and closed 243 cases. Our Batavia office, located in Batavia and serving Genesee, Orleans, and Wyoming counties, opened 445 and closed 373 cases. In total, our four offices opened 5,275 cases and closed 5,820 cases during the reporting period. NLS’ work impacted households containing 13,022 people, which included 5,506 children, 1,099 victims of domestic violence, 196 veterans and 1,919 individuals living with a disability.

Due to the efforts of NLS staff, \$1,131,492 in back benefit awards and \$154,204 in monthly benefits were secured for clients during this period. Included in this amount are retroactive awards of Social Security and SSI benefits totaling \$702,596, and \$71,992 in monthly benefits. We also procured \$75,872 in back child support awards for clients and \$31,012 in monthly child support payments.

NLS increased access to justice through the initiation or expansion of a variety of programs. We continued to act as the clearinghouse for all Erie County Hub Court eviction cases and provide legal assistance to Hub Court tenants together with Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo (LAB), Center for Elder Law and Justice (CELJ), Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project, Inc. (VLP), and Western New York Law Center (WNYLC). The Hub Court increases access to justice by consolidating all town and justice court evictions under one virtual roof. This makes it easier for legal services providers to provide representation



**Service Area:** Western New York

**Population Served:** General Low-Income Population

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**  
 Total Staff: 109.8 Lawyers: 46.9  
 Paralegals: 38.3 Others: 24.6

to an increased number of tenants facing homelessness and eviction because cases are heard virtually, each afternoon, Monday through Thursday. Additionally, we continued our Attorney of the Morning Programs (AMP) in Buffalo, Batavia, Tonawanda, Niagara Falls, North Tonawanda, and Lockport City Courts.

NLS expanded the Western New York Eviction Prevention Project (WNY-EPP), which provides legal advocacy to tenants in our five-county area with income up to 80% of AMI who are facing eviction and/or homelessness to include SUNY-University at Buffalo School of Law (UB Law) and Belmont Housing Resources for WNY, Inc. (Belmont). NLS works collaboratively with LAB, VLP, CELJ, WNYLC, UB Law, and Belmont in this endeavor and acts as the clearinghouse for the majority of tenants who seek assistance through this program.

NLS strives to improve the health and well-being of its clients in a manner that promotes access to justice through creative strategies such as our current medical-legal partnership (MLP) program. MLPs identify health-harming legal needs before they negatively impact a client's health or health care by embedding civil legal services attorneys in the health care provider setting. We continue to expand our MLPs with local medical providers, which allow us to serve clients better in a myriad of ways: through better access to medical records for disability-related claims and defenses, more holistic approaches to problem-solving, and through greater access to the services we provide for people in need. NLS currently has MLPs with Roswell Comprehensive Care Center, Evergreen Health, Catholic Health/Catholic Charities, and most recently, at the Buffalo VA Medical Center, through a Legal Services for Homeless Veterans Grant with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

NLS has also significantly improved our capacity to deliver services by increasing program staff. In spring 2023, NLS opened an additional office in Lockport, NY. This new location makes services accessible to those who do not have transportation or who need representation in the courts located in the City of Lockport.

In March 2024, NLS opened a second downtown Buffalo office to increase client access to services. It is designed for walk-in traffic and will ultimately house a new NLS intake unit. The office opened to the public in June 2024.

# DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

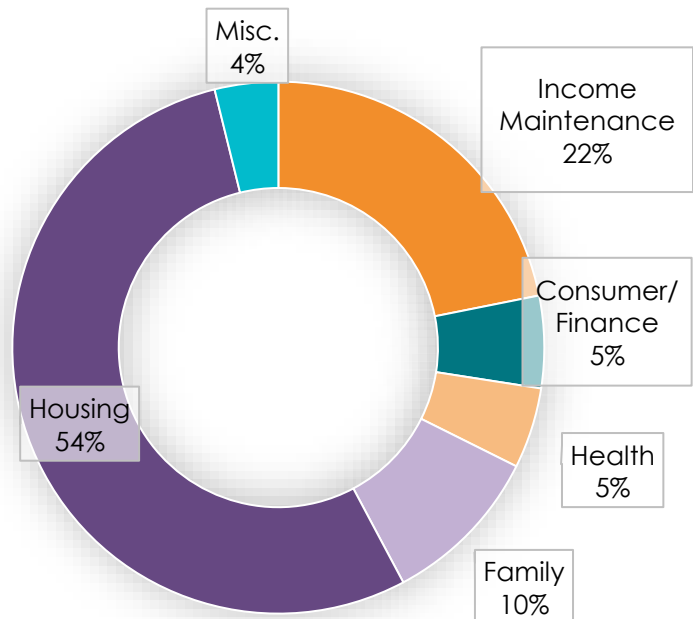
**Case Example #1, Housing:** Jodi suffers from PTSD, borderline personality disorder, and depression. She was living in an apartment overrun with bats and bed bugs. Her rent was being subsidized by Section 8 benefits. Jodi’s landlord was not motivated to remedy the situation. Out of desperation, she fled the residence without notice to the landlord or to her Section 8 agency and became homeless rather than remaining in those conditions. The Section 8 program moved to terminate Jodi’s eligibility for benefits based on her moving without notice, thereby violating a condition of eligibility. NLS appealed the decision and was able to convince the agency to give Jodi a reasonable accommodation, reverse course, and allow her to remain eligible for benefits based on her emotional challenges. Jodi is now living in a new apartment free of vermin and continues to receive her Section 8 subsidy.

**Case Example #2, Disability:** Lori suffered from a variety of injuries from a car accident and then from a domestic violence attack that rendered her homeless.

She was denied SSI benefits despite her age of 55 and her severe physical impairments, including herniated discs, lumbar spondylosis, knee pain, and frequent headaches. NLS represented Lori at a Social Security disability hearing. She was awarded monthly benefits of \$914, and back pay of \$28,061. The assistance from NLS allowed her to secure stable housing and obtain medical care.



## CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA:



## OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

NLS has a substantial community legal education, outreach, and web presence within the local and state legal services delivery system. Community education is a significant component of our advocacy. During the reporting period, we delivered 115 community legal education training sessions as either stand-alone seminars, clinics, or as part of a program or conference. The events were attended by 5,424 people, including legal services advocates, social workers, housing providers, case managers and clients. These training sessions provided information on work incentives, fair housing and housing discrimination, public benefits and utility issues, landlord and tenant issues, special education, and domestic violence, as well as other topics of interest to individuals impacted by poverty and/or disability. NLS community education materials are posted to the NLS website, [www.nls.org](http://www.nls.org), to amplify and standardize legal information and advice routinely delivered through the NLS intake system.

NLS' community legal education goal is to maximize the benefits to clients. through efficient utilization of our limited financial resources. Through the provision of legal information materials and community legal education, our staff assist case managers, social workers, lay advocates and their clients in identifying, referring, solving, or preventing legal problems. In this manner, we exponentially increase the number of people within our client community who receive the benefits of our legal expertise.

NLS staff provide pro se legal information materials to clients who are rejected for services due to financial ineligibility, conflict of interest, insufficient program resources, or outside of program service area on a case-by-case basis. During the reporting period, 504 of these materials were distributed to clients.

**634**

people  
benefited from  
**Pro Se  
Assistance**

**9,922**

people  
benefited from  
**Community  
Legal  
Education**

**17,966**

people  
benefited from  
**Web-Based  
Assistance**

**Know Your Rights Series:** Presentations on legal issues by NLS advocates for community members and community agency staff. Focused on Social Security, Public Benefits, Housing, and Family Law.

**Say Yes!** Health Insurance Series: Presentations on Medicaid, Medicare, NYSOH, and private payor insurance for community members and community agency staff. Includes general Q and A, as well as one-on-one counseling opportunities on-site, post-presentation.

## TECHNOLOGY

During the reporting period, NLS worked with a developer on a new website that will be more accessible to people with all levels of abilities and will be easier to navigate. In addition to providing online intake, the new website will contain a searchable resource library and updated informational materials for prospective clients, pro se individuals, community partners, and the public.

NLS is working with a consultant on technology-support for a WNY-EPP coordinated intake system among our partners that would streamline the process for potential clients and eliminate redundancy in pre-screening/services provided by different agencies. On a statewide level, NLS is working with the Legal Services Access Alliance, LawHelpNY, and subcontracting agencies throughout the state to create a statewide (i.e., outside of NYC) portal for eviction defense services.

## IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

Supplemental 2023 IOLA Technology Grant funding allowed NLS to upgrade 30 monitors, 20 docking stations, and 30 keyboards for staff members, as well as offset costs of IT services provided by our MSP. Additionally, this supported the expense of two staff members to attend the annual LegalServer conference. NLS would have paid the costs of MSP services without upgrading the equipment.

A regular schedule to update the equipment is one of our strategic technology goals. We have not been able to set a regular schedule for funding reasons until receiving this support through IOLA. Our staff members' attendance at LegalServer conference not only allowed them to learn about new features of our case management system, but also paved the road to a number of projects and initiatives we would like to implement that would improve our intake process and communication with clients.

# PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

In 2024, NLS continued to contract with VLP to support the delivery of pro bono services in Erie County. In addition to our substantial financial commitment to VLP, our staff provide considerable support to the work of private attorneys involved in delivering pro bono services through the development of written materials. These include advocacy-training materials, substantive law materials in areas of poverty law, training, preparing cases, telephone access and advice, and counseling attorneys about areas of poverty and disability law. Our staff members account for these private attorney involvement (PAI) activities in our timekeeping system. Each NLS unit provides its unique expertise and support to pro bono attorneys working on behalf of low-income clients. These efforts are in addition to the sub-grant with the VLP.

Our Batavia, Lockport, and Niagara Falls offices refer cases to the private bar in their service area through their pro bono referral process. We also partner with the University at Buffalo School of Law, making use of their law students, particularly in our Buffalo office. NLS uses law students in all our units for direct client services, research, drafting memos and pleadings, data entry, and assisting with project management. We have an established recruitment, training, and supervision protocol, which allows for effective on-boarding of student volunteers.

**3**attorneys volunteered **22** hours**2**law students volunteered **15** hours**2**other volunteers volunteered **196** hours

# SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

**Western New York Eviction Prevention Project:** NLS expanded the Western New York Eviction Prevention Project (WNY-EPP), to include Civil Justice in Maryland (coordinated intake consultant), UB Law, VIA 211, and Belmont Housing Resources, along with LAB, VLP, CELJ, 2-1-1 WNY, and WNYLC. WNY-EPP provides legal advocacy to tenants in the five-county area with income up to 80% of AMI who are facing eviction and/or homelessness, and now distributes OTDA-funded rent arrears benefits. WNY-EPP's partnerships expanded to include Civil Justice in Maryland (coordinated intake consultant), University at Buffalo School of Law Clinical Program, VIA 211, and Belmont Housing Resources. NLS works collaboratively with all of these subcontractors and serves as the clearinghouse for the majority of tenants who seek assistance through this program.

**Legal Services Access Alliance:** NLS is a founding member of the Legal Services Access Alliance (Alliance). NLS' executive director meets bi-weekly with Alliance members to coordinate NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance eviction prevention grants throughout NYS, outside of New York City. The Alliance conducts statewide housing law trainings for legal services advocates and is collaborating on a Legal Services Corporation Technology Initiative Grant to create a statewide eviction prevention application portal for people facing eviction.

**The Bar Association of Erie County:** NLS' executive director is the president of the Bar Association of Erie County (BAEC) and in spring 2024 had the opportunity to educate the BAEC staff, board of directors, and membership on the importance of IOLA and its funding for free civil legal services.

**Assistance for Victims of Domestic Violence:** NLS conducts same-day intake for referrals from the Family Justice Center and assists victims of domestic violence needing emergency protective orders. NLS also partners with WNYLC, Crisis Services, and 2-1-1 WNY to provide enhanced and holistic legal services for victims of crime in Erie County.

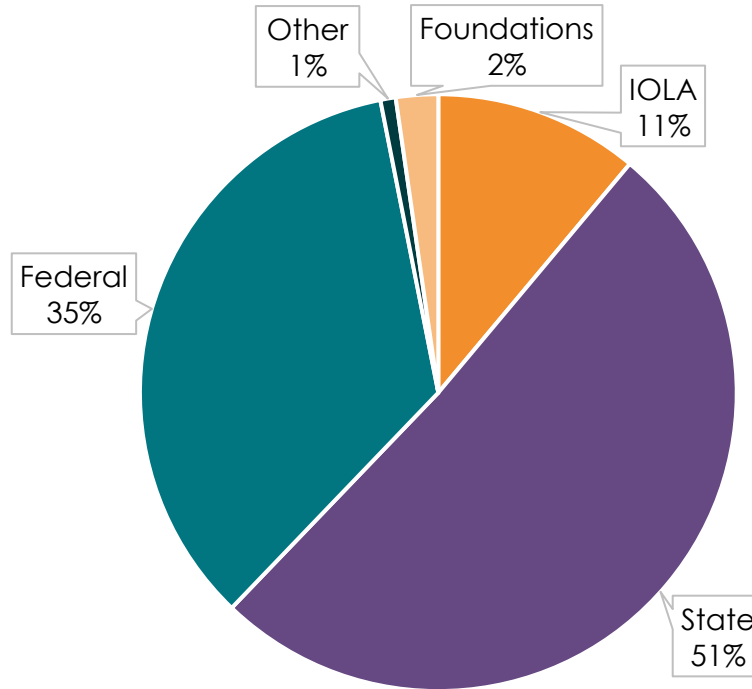
**Medical-legal Partnerships:** NLS has created medical-legal partnerships with Roswell Comprehensive Care Center, Evergreen Health, Catholic Health/Catholic Charities, and, most recently, the Buffalo VA Medical Center. These MLPs improve clients' health by resolving health-harming legal needs and allow for a multidisciplinary team approach to problem solving.

Over the past year, NLS' Justice Bus program collaborated with community-based organizations to conduct 78 outreach, education, and pop-up clinics.



# CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

## \$ 13,996,314



<b>IOLA Funding</b>	<b>\$ 1,548,025</b>
<b>City &amp; County Funding</b>	<b>\$ 7,200</b>
<b>State Funding</b>	<b>\$ 7,129,484</b>
<b>Federal Funding</b>	<b>\$ 4,844,444</b>
<b>Foundations</b>	<b>\$ 319,159</b>
<b>Fundraising</b>	<b>\$ 32,556</b>
<b>Other Funding</b>	<b>\$ 115,444</b>