

NEIGHBORS LINK

**2023 – 2024
Report**

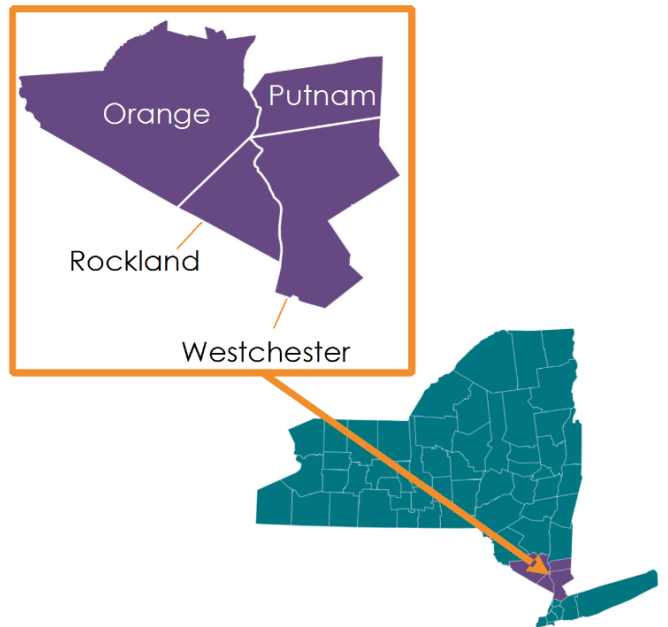
OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

In this grant period, of April 1, 2023 – March 31, 2024, Neighbors Link Community Law Practice (NLCLP) closed 1,685 cases, directly benefiting 4,257 people (clients and their family members). NLCLP, the legal department of Neighbors Link that is housed in our Ossining, NY (Westchester County) center, provides direct representation, community legal education, consultation, and legal advocacy for low-income immigrants throughout the lower- and mid-Hudson Valley regions.

Members of the low-income immigrant population NLCLP serves find themselves in an extremely vulnerable position; a lack of English language skills and low levels of literacy can make scams by unqualified lawyers more likely and living on a low income makes it impossible to afford costly legal fees charged by for-profit immigration lawyers. The legal services this population seeks can be confusing and have the potential to have devastating outcomes (such as deportation, detention, and family separation) if not handled correctly. Affordable, trustworthy, and language-accommodating services are essential for this population.

The benefits of the services to NLCLP clients that improve access to justice are: A) Low or no-cost services for those who are living in poverty; B) Services that accommodate language needs and effectively overcome communication barriers; C) Trustworthy services from a reputable source with a client’s best interest at the center of the work increases the likelihood of favorable case completion.

Additionally, because we are a not-for-profit organization serving the needs of the low-income immigrant community, we are able to provide assistance in filing fee waivers, which help low-income clients save money. During this grant period, clients successfully obtained \$47,925 in immigration filing fee waivers.



Service Area: Westchester, Rockland, Putnam, Dutchess, Orange, and other Upstate NY Counties

Population Served: Low Income Immigrant Population

Staffing Full Time Equivalents:
 Total Staff: 23.05 Lawyers: 8
 Paralegals: 10 Others: 5.05

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

Asylum Case: Julie entered the United States as an unaccompanied child when she was 14 years old to reunite with her mother whom she hadn't seen for almost 10 years. Once in the United States, Julie was placed in removal proceedings. Even as a child, she was not entitled to an attorney so Neighbors Link took on representation. This was in 2014. At this time, we submitted an application for asylum for Julie. Her initial asylum application explained that she was afraid to return to her home country of El Salvador because of gang violence and threats that she and her siblings had received. Her trauma was palpable.



After approximately two years of working together and receiving therapy Julie explained the true reason for why she was afraid to return to El Salvador; she had been sexually assaulted by her uncle for years. Julie's grandmother, whom she was living with, did not believe Julie when she tried to explain what had happened to her and her grandmother refused to protect her. Julie even went to the police on her own to file a police report and they would not help her because she was "just a child".

With this information, we immediately began working on an amended asylum application and obtaining forensic evaluations to bolster her case. Her case was initially heard before the Asylum Office in 2018 (about 3 years after the initial asylum submission). Even though the Asylum Office found Julie's case credible and found that she had suffered past persecution in El Salvador, they still denied her asylum application. It took nearly 6 years before we would have her case re-heard before an Immigration Judge. During that time, we prepared new statements, witness affidavits, new forensic reports from therapists and psychologists, and amended country condition research. During this time Julie continued to live with the constant fear of deportation.

Finally, in February of 2024, Julie's asylum case was heard and Julie was granted asylum and her removal proceedings were ended. Now she will have asylee status for one year and then will be able to apply for permanent resident status. Without representation, Julie would not only have been denied asylum but she likely would have been ordered deported and been forced to return to El Salvador where her only family abused her.

SIJ AOS Case: Susy came to the United States when she was 15 years old fleeing her abusive father in Guatemala. After arriving in the United States, she became homeless and was found sleeping in a cemetery in Mount Kisco. Neighbors Link client services were able to find her shelter and assist her in registering to attend school. NLCLP then began representing Susy in her immigration matter. We first appeared with her before the Immigration Court and were eventually able to have her removal case dismissed. Additionally, we helped her obtain a legal guardian in the Westchester Family Court so that the guardian could care for her and help address her educational, advocacy, and medical treatment needs.

Through this guardianship petition, we were also able to obtain the requisite documents for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. Susy obtained SIJS and this year was able to adjust through this SIJS application. She now has a green card and can continue her life in the United States.

CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA



OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

Community Legal Education: NLCLP provides community education on immigration legal topics to ensure that members of the community are educated consumers of immigration legal services and to spread awareness about the immigration legal services provided by NLCLP. Our presentations act as a general overview of immigration legal services that encourage participants to schedule a consultation or to call our 12-hour once-per-week legal helpline for an assessment of their legal needs directly with an attorney. We conduct presentations for the immigrant community as well as for partner organizations and community allies.

We also create public service announcements/PSAs to disseminate immigration legal information using social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. During this grant year, we have reached 7,769 individuals through community education. 235 people attended in-person presentations, which can include Know Your Rights presentations, Train the Trainer workshops, or training staff of schools and community organizations on the rights of immigrants in their communities. 2,593 attended live/interactive online presentations, such as through Facebook Live and/or Zoom. And lastly, 4,941 viewed pre-recorded/static online presentations/ PSAs, which is content that is pre-recorded and posted on YouTube and shared widely across our social media platforms.

484

people
benefitted from
**Pro Se
Assistance**

7,769

people
benefitted from
**Community
Legal
Education**

Pro Se Assistance: During this grant year, we have also increased our delivery of limited scope services, meaning that we can help pro se applicants in a limited capacity by assisting individuals with one aspect of their case without having to take the case for full representation. Delivery of limited scope services has allowed our team to efficiently serve a higher volume of people, especially with the increase in new arrivals. Between April 1, 2023, and March 31, 2024, we served 484 people through limited scope service workshops or clinics.

Example (Asylum Video Series): Over the past year, we noticed a decrease in viewer engagement in longer-duration educational/PSA videos, so we have begun creating shorter videos within larger “series” or groups of videos related to a single topic that can be watched in more manageable, bite-sized durations. Most recently, we posted a four-part video series on Asylum, which can be viewed on our YouTube page. Because the majority of our immigration legal clients are Spanish-speaking, videos are frequently created/narrated in Spanish. However, this is not always the case and, depending on the topic being covered and the anticipated audience that the content of the video will apply to, some videos are presented in English.

Example (Motion Practice and Asylum Applications): This year Neighbors Link has increased our use of unbundled legal services in order to meet the needs of new arrivals in the Lower Hudson Valley. The work has largely consisted of motion practice and asylum applications. New arrivals often enter the interior of the United States after being placed in removal proceedings.

These removal proceedings are calendared for immigration courts throughout the United States despite the fact that new arrivals have relocated to the New York region. As such, the first need of individuals is to change their addresses and file motions to change the venue of their removal proceedings. If individuals are unable to, or fail to, appear at their immigration hearings they can automatically be ordered deported in absentia.

Additionally, new arrivals must file for asylum in the United States within one year of entering the United States. Therefore, a major concern of immigration providers is to be sure everyone files before this deadline. To meet these deadlines, we have been focused on applying for asylum for all eligible new arrivals in the community.

TECHNOLOGY

NLCLP began using LexisNexis, a data analytics software tool, last year to help with research and writing which is critically important for preparing motion and legal briefs before the immigration court, BIA, and court of appeals.

In addition, we continue to utilize the technology-related strategies that we implemented last year, including the Helpline, language and translation services, and our increased utilization of the Zoom and WhatsApp platforms. The 12-hour telephone-based Helpline, which runs weekly on Thursday from 8am to 8pm, has continued to drastically improve NLCLP's ability to perform screenings for potential clients. We have been working with RushTranslate and other secure language and translation services which allow NLCLP staff and clients to access on-demand interpretation and translation services via audio and visual formats in over 250 languages.

Our use of Zoom and WhatsApp has been incredibly effective in improving communication with clients. Depending on the transportation challenges and/or other needs of our clients, we can meet virtually via Zoom to discuss case matters face-to-face in a secure platform, just as if we were sitting with them in an office. WhatsApp has become a secure and safe tool for communicating with clients about upcoming appointments and reminders about documentation that they should gather and bring with them.

IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

NLCLP utilized the \$10,000 technology infrastructure grant that we received to purchase laptops for new legal staff members joining our team during the grant period as well as to cover our cyber security insurance premium. NLCLP's staff doubled in size over the past year to increase our capacity to provide urgent services to the new arrival immigrants coming to our region. Each new staff member receives a Neighbors Link-provided laptop with the required software installed.

Additionally, cyber security is critically important to our practice to protect the privacy of the clients we serve. This funding covered a cyber security insurance premium payment of \$3,638. NLCLP has grown exponentially and as such, the cost-of-service delivery and infrastructure have also increased at a rapid pace. This technology infrastructure funding alleviated pressure to identify and allocate other funding sources to cover costs and allowed us to make these necessary purchases quickly and efficiently.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

The capacity of NLCLP is expanded by using highly qualified volunteer attorneys, paralegals, law students, college students, and high school-aged volunteers. NLCLP benefits from pro bono work donated by three large, for-profit law firms: Davis Polk & Wardwell, Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel, and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld.

The total pro bono time donated by 16 volunteer attorneys during this grant period totaled 930.30 hours of volunteered time. We also had 1 Law Student who volunteered with us for a total of 51.98 hours, providing support in both case-related and other matters.

During this grant period, we had an additional 16 volunteers (including college and high school student volunteers as well as paralegals) who contributed a total of 990.86 volunteer hours. These volunteers helped NLCLP with document preparation and translation, facilitating transportation, obtaining underlying documents, assistance with naturalization-related guardianship arrangements and alternatives to guardianship, accompanying individuals to check-ins, and getting disability accommodations including through USCIS.

All pro bono and volunteer work is closely supervised by an attorney on staff.

16attorneys volunteered **930** hours**1**law student volunteered **52** hours**16**other volunteers volunteered **991** hours

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

Westchester County Bar Association: One collaboration this year has included our work with the Westchester County Bar Association (WCBA), where we recently became an annual non-profit partner. As a non-profit partner, we are members of the WCBA Public Service Committee where there is a Westchester and Lower Hudson Valley initiative to provide pro bono services to in-need community members throughout the lower Hudson Valley. This intimate partnership enhances Neighbors Link’s ability to provide services through a new base of volunteers including those attorneys from the Westchester County Attorney’s Office.

Colleges: Additionally, this year we have created a close relationship with local colleges including Bard College, Vassar College, and Sarah Lawrence College. These educational institutions have created a curriculum around the asylum process and partnered with Neighbors Link to provide students with hands-on experience while providing community members with much-needed legal services. These students meet with new arrivals at hotel shelters to assist attorneys with translating documents, interpreting for client meetings, document compilation, and application preparation.

Other Legal Services: We continue to partner with other legal service organizations as mentioned in previous reports such as Immigrant Advocates Response Collaborative (I-ARC), Hudson Valley Immigrant Providers, Women’s Bar Association, New York State Bar Association, and New York Immigration Coalition.

CIVIL LEGAL FUNDING

Bar Associations	\$55,000
IOLA Funding	\$115,266
Foundations	\$22,900
State Funding	\$ 1,081,563
Other	\$184,115

