

# **VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT OF CNY**

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**2023 – 2024  
Report**

# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

In the 2023-24 year, Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, Inc. (VLP) conducted 4,973 intakes, closed 3,508 individual cases, benefiting 8,865 people in civil legal issues affecting the essentials of life, including housing, family, elder and divorce law, and provided legal assistance in 58 group cases, supporting low-income entrepreneurs and nonprofits serving low-income individuals. VLP provided referrals to other legal and social services to 1,557 individuals. Overall, VLP’s panel of over 600 pro bono volunteers provided over 7,309 hours of service.

**VLP’s Immigration Program** served over 800 immigrant families, benefiting over 2,300 community members. VLP continues its coordinated services to those who fled Afghanistan and Ukraine in partnership with Hiscock Legal Aid, Catholic Charities, Interfaith Works and RISE. Pro bono attorneys and law students continue preparing asylum, TPS and other applications to help these families obtain permanent stability here in CNY.

**VLP’s LGBT Rights program** continued working closely with community partners across the state to provide transgender name change clinics and address anti-LGBTQ discrimination in housing, employment, healthcare and public accommodations. The program completed 252 transgender name changes. Law students from Cornell Law School and Syracuse University College of Law volunteered over 2,400 hours serving these clients.

**VLP’s Family Court Clinic, Divorce, and Surrogates Court Programs** which assist unrepresented litigants closed 1,135 cases benefiting over 3,000 community members. Our community-based Talk to a Lawyer clinics served 246 people before the year end.



**Service Area:** Central Region of New York State

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

**Staffing Full Time Equivalents:**

Total Staff: 27.02	Lawyers: 13.5
Paralegals: 9.19	Others: 4.33

**Our Tenant Defense program** closed 557 cases, benefiting 1,423 individuals. For those facing eviction in court, we prevented eviction for 44% of households, delayed eviction for 51% of households, and reduced the amount owed by tenants by \$862,827.

**VLP's Debt Defense program** closed 53 cases and saved debtors \$120,486. VLP focused both on medical debt and educational debt, to fight unjust collection practices and empower healthcare consumers by strengthening efforts to end medical debt in CNY and reduce educational debt.

VLP provided community legal trainings to 553 individuals and VLP connected with another 3,587 community members via brochures, tabling and other events. VLP also trained 216 lawyers on pro bono legal issues.

## DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES

**Case Example #1, Immigration:** VLPCNY first met Juan in 2019 when he was 13 years old. Juan was a very shy young teen from Guatemala. Juan's father encouraged him to travel alone to the U.S. with the promise that he would take care of his son once Juan came to the U.S. Juan's father left Guatemala when Juan was a very young child and Juan does not remember when he last saw his father in Guatemala. Juan's mother was abusive and could not provide Juan necessities such as food, clothing, and education. Juan made the dangerous journey from Guatemala to the U.S.

8,865

people  
benefited  
from

3,508

legal cases  
closed

He was apprehended by US Border Patrol at the border in Texas and placed in Immigration Court removal proceedings. As an unaccompanied minor, the US Office of Refugee Resettlement released Juan in the care of his father. When Juan was released and travelled to New York to be reunited with his father, Juan's father refused to pick up and take care of his son. After some time, two wonderful members of the North Country community came forward to obtain legal custody of Juan along with a Special Findings of Fact Court Order finding that it was not in the best interest of Juan to return

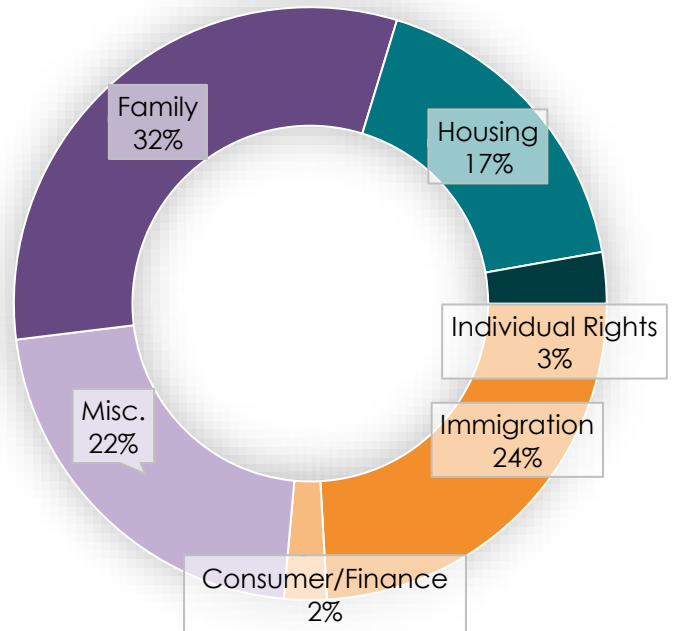
to Guatemala based on the abuse, neglect, and abandonment of both parents. VLPCNY provided legal representation in the Family Court legal custody case, as well as Immigration Court and US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The legal custody and special findings order allowed Juan to apply for a protection called Special Immigrant Juvenile Status with USCIS. Juan’s Immigration Court case was dismissed, and Juan was able to obtain Deferred Action and Employment Authorization while he waited for a visa number to apply for lawful permanent residence. Juan is now 18 years old and is in the process of applying for lawful permanent residence.

**Case Example #2, Consumer/Finance:**

Client, a single mother with limited income, contacted VLPCNY after her tax return of more than \$2,700.00 was offset in 2023 for a judgment that was entered against her in 2005 by SUNY Upstate Hospital. As client has a medical condition which prevents her from holding full-time employment, client was counting on her tax return to help pay bills and support her family. She did not recognize the judgment or remember any lawsuit being filed against her for medical bills but was not able to resolve the case by contacting the hospital, the Office of the NY Attorney General, or the NY Department of Taxation and Finance.

Client contacted our office for assistance and, after investigating and obtaining the court records, the Debt Program discovered that the hospital had attempted to serve the client with court papers at an address where she had never lived and was completely unfamiliar with. We also determined that the client had clear defenses to any alleged debt from the hospital. We attempted to negotiate with the Office of the Attorney General for the return of the offset funds, but were unable to reach a resolution. At the same time, we prepared an order to show cause to request the court vacate the default judgment, dismiss the underlying case, and provide restitution for the full amount of the funds offset from the client’s tax return. Immediately upon the filing and service of the Order to Show Cause, the hospital and the Attorney General’s office agreed to vacate the default judgment and return all of the client’s offset tax return to her.

**CASES BY LEGAL PROBLEM AREA**



## OTHER LEGAL-RELATED SERVICES

For VLP, community legal education is a critical component in the continuum of legal services, helping the community understand their legal rights and how to access legal services, including VLP services, that can help them navigate the legal system. VLP's target population is people who cannot afford legal assistance or who cannot find legal assistance. We also target education for case managers, medical providers, and other direct service providers who work regularly with these populations.

The majority of VLP's Community Legal Education efforts are focused in Central New York, though VLP has programs that cover 19 counties. VLP provides legal education in association with different community-based organizations, including shelters, schools, churches, and tenants' rights groups. These training courses cover the range of legal services that VLP provides, including housing, family law, immigration, elder and consumer law. VLP does more targeted community legal education for immigrant communities and the LGBT community.

In total, VLP provided community legal education sessions to 553 individuals. Further, combined with other community legal education outreach, such as distribution of legal education brochures and flyers, VLP to over shared legal education materials and content with over 3,500 individuals.

**LGBTQIA Program:** VLP's LGBTQIA program held a pop-up legal clinic at CNY Pride again this year, where in addition to distributing brochures and materials regarding our services, we conducted intakes and drafted petitions for name changes on the spot. Throughout the day VLP spoke with over 150 community members, and over 40 name change cases resulted from the event.

50

people  
benefited from  
**Pro Se  
Assistance**

4,140

people  
benefited from  
**Community  
Legal Education**

**Debt Program:** VLP participated in several Medical Debt Forums, where VLP prepared clients to speak about their experiences with medical debt. VLP also worked with a client to have their devastating story regarding collections by Upstate Hospital while he was dying from pancreatic cancer published by Syracuse.com to raise awareness about the effects of medical debt. Sadly, the story ran shortly after the client had passed away. But the story spread and had a significant impact on public awareness about medical debt in CNY. While VLP's name doesn't appear in the article, VLP was behind every aspect of getting this article written. <https://www.syracuse.com/health/2023/12/how-ny-state-upstate-medical-haul-thousands-of-sick-and-poor-into-court-for-little-gain.html>

## TECHNOLOGY

This year we developed and implemented an online Pro Bono Opportunities Portal on our website where volunteers can peruse volunteer opportunities. These opportunities are fed automatically from LegalServer to the website and when someone expresses interest we receive an email form to know to either onboard them (for new volunteers) or to assign the case to them. This is helping us to bring in new volunteers who might not have realized that there are ongoing opportunities or new cases available.

## IOLA TECHNOLOGY GRANT

VLP used the technology grant to purchase new computers for staff and volunteers that were badly needed. Many of multi-year grants only allow us to purchase computers in year one of the grant and do not allow us to make new purchases later, even when staff grows or more computers are needed for interns or for legal clinics. This Technology Grant was transformative in allowing us to upgrade many of our staff computers and then allowing us to redesignate those older computers for volunteers.

Because of the grant we were able to provide computers for VLP use to all 14 interns that worked in our office this semester. Providing computers allows us to ensure that sensitive client data is being securely accessed, and also allows us to set up the students with all of the software, links and interactions that they need. We have found that when interns try to use their personal computers there are significant difficulties caused by multiple Microsoft 365 identities being used

on the same computer (because they use Microsoft 365 for their school accounts as well). This leads to difficulty opening documents, saving documents, accessing documents through the Legalserver/Sharepoint API that we have set up, and more. This grant allowed us to simply provide quality laptops for VLP work, eliminating this problem.

## PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

VLP has a roster of over 600 volunteers. VLP's pro bono panel provided 7,309 hours of pro bono service this year. Volunteers lawyers served in all VLP programs and represented clients in 34% of the cases that VLP closed. VLP actively engages law students as well, who assist with intake, drafting client documents, research and even practice under student practice orders.

This year we held CLE training sessions that were attended by 194 volunteers. We use these training sessions to keep people up with the law and to recruit new volunteers.

**141**

attorneys volunteered **1,309** hours

**92**

law students volunteered **5,196** hours

**14**

other volunteers volunteered **804** hours

# SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

**Onondaga County Bar Association:** VLP continues the collaboration with the Onondaga County Bar Association (OCBA). OCBA helps VLP to promote pro bono opportunities and recruit volunteers from OCBA's membership. OCBA sends e-blasts with VLP updates to its entire membership. OCBA co-sponsors CLEs that VLP provides for free to train volunteer attorneys in exchange for their pro bono time commitment. VLP refers clients who are not financially eligible for VLP's services to OCBA's Lawyer Referral Service, and OCBA's Lawyer Referral Service sends clients who cannot afford an attorney to VLP's services.

**Other Bar Associations:** VLP continues to collaborate with several other bar associations, including the Central New York Women's Bar Association, the Jefferson, Oswego and Cayuga County Bar Associations, the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Upstate New York Chapter, the William Herbert Johnson Bar Association, VLP's local minority bar association, and New York State Bar Association.

**Community Based Organizations:** VLP collaborates with many community organizations and agencies that have housed VLP's clinics, all of which work to promote VLP programs to their clients and members. These organizations include Onondaga County Libraries, Westcott Community Center, the Syracuse Vet Center, Fort Drum Army Base, the Rescue Mission, many of Catholic Charities' programs, Interfaith Works, the Vera House, Oswego County Opportunities, Upstate Hospital, the Samaritan Center, Syracuse City School District, SUNY EOC, Planned Parenthood, ACR Health's Q Center (LGBT Youth Center), the Gender Wellness Center in Oneonta and many more. In addition to these partners, VLP collaborates with organizations to provide community legal education, including the Housing and Homeless Coalition of CNY, which is made up of over 30 organizations, the CNY Human Services Leadership Coalition, consisting of 70 organizations, Antitrafficking Coalitions in the North Country, Migrant Farmworker Coalitions, the Syracuse Tenants Union, the Workers' Center of Central New York, Jubilee Homes and more.

**Frank H. Hiscock Legal Aid Society:** VLP's most significant collaboration with a legal services provider is with Hiscock Legal Aid Society (HLA). VLP and HLA share one immigration program and work together on all aspects of service. VLP and HLA together attempt to achieve representation of 100% of clients who appear in landlord-tenant court in Syracuse City Court. VLP's divorce program only takes clients that are conflicted out of HLA. VLP also works with Legal Services of Central New York (LSCNY), Legal Aid Society of Mid New York (LASMNY),



Center for Community Alternatives, Syracuse University College of Law Clinical Program, Cornell University Law School Clinical Program, and CNY Fair Housing.

**New York Legal Services Coalition:** Finally, VLP is actively engaged in the New York Legal Services Coalition, a group with nearly 50 legal aid groups that collaborates to advocate for the provision of high quality legal services across New York State. VLP’s Executive Director is the Co-Chair of the Legislative Steering Committee and in this role works regularly with other legal aid providers to raise awareness about the need for Civil Legal Services, as well as advocate for the security of legal aid funding such as IOLA.

## CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUNDING

**\$3,890,437**

City and County	\$188,694
IOLA Funding	\$115,266
Foundations	\$278,786
Fundraising	\$87,282
State Funding	\$2,899,667
Other	\$66,803

