


# MY SISTERS' PLACE

2022-2023



# OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The Center for Legal Services (CLS) staff has remained committed to its clients and providing the highest level of legal services during the pandemic, and we are feeling incredibly grateful to be coming out on the other side of a tumultuous and uncertain time in the lives of our clients. Our legal work has changed in many ways, and we realize that adding flexibility to our practice using technology and the “old fashioned” phone call has enabled us to serve more clients in a more efficient manner. During the reporting period our attorney staff served 1,283 clients in both Family Law and Immigration matters. We served our clients in a variety of ways: in-person appointments, walk-in clients, telephone conferences, e-mail and text as well as web based platforms for court hearings. We also offer clients a secure telehealth platform for client meetings, however this form of technology has not been popular with our clients. The CLS continues to operate on a hybrid schedule ensuring that we always have attorneys and paralegal staff in each of our three offices on any given day.

MSP continues to serve victims of gender-based violence from many diverse communities across Westchester County, where nearly half the population identifies as either Hispanic or Latina/o (25.9%), Black/African American (16.7%), Asian (2.6%), or two or more races (2.7%).<sup>8</sup> 5.9% of the population under age 65 is living with a disability, and 3.7% are Deaf or hard of hearing.<sup>9</sup> Westchester has a higher density of older adults than the rest of New York State (NYS), with 17.4% of the population over 65.<sup>10</sup> The county has 5.03 same-sex households per 1,000, giving it a lower density of LGBTQ families than the national average, and contributing to a lack of visibility and community cohesion. DV, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking all occur at high rates in MSP’s service area. Last year, MSP became a partner in the newly launched Westchester County Domestic Violence High-Risk Team (DVHRT) - a



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

**Total Funding:** \$2,052,390

**Total IOLA Grant:** \$87,500

**Staffing Full Time Equivalent:**

- Total Staff: 22
- Paralegals: 6
- Lawyers: 12
- Other: 4

collaboration among county agencies, law enforcement, and victim response teams to provide enhanced safety and support for DV victims assessed to be at an increased risk for homicide. Referrals from this program have steadily increased during each month of operation. 1,262 lethality-indicated cases were identified through this initiative in 2022, indicating a large scale of high-risk victimization in the area. MSP's staff have been working tirelessly to connect individuals referred through the DVHRT to urgently needed shelter, safety planning, legal services, and trauma counseling.

Due to increased demand for legal services the Family Law Unit started “Legal Advice Days” designed to be an alternative to adding callers to long wait lists for legal advice. These free and confidential legal sessions are offered on the 2nd and 4th Monday of every month and are designed to provide legal advice and counsel for those in immediate need on a pending family court matter. Three consultations slots are scheduled each day either in person, or virtually depending on the caller’s comfort and preference. Many of these consultations turned into legal representations and when we were unable to represent the client, the information and referrals provided allowed them to be prepared for their upcoming court appearance(s).

Similarly, the Immigration Unit has scheduled Immigration Advice Clinics during the reporting period allowing callers to receive immediate advice and counsel on their immigration matters. For those callers who qualify for our services, a full consultation is conducted, and for those who do not qualify for our services we provide a referral to a partner agency.

Both the Legal Advice Days and Immigration Clinics serve to provide information and legal advice to callers quickly and efficiently. Although callers may not receive immediate legal representation, they are equipped with legal advice and an understanding of the next steps as it relates to family court and immigration matters.

The CLS has solidified its management staff during the reporting period by successfully promoting from within its qualified ranks of attorneys: Silvia Lederman is serving as Managing Director of the CLS, Jessica Richardson was promoted to Managing Attorney of the Immigration Unit in May, and Ida Serrano was promoted to Managing Attorney of the Family Law Unit in August. This solid and experienced team of managers work hard to mentor and provide support for our attorney and paralegal staff.

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# DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES: CASES

## Case #1

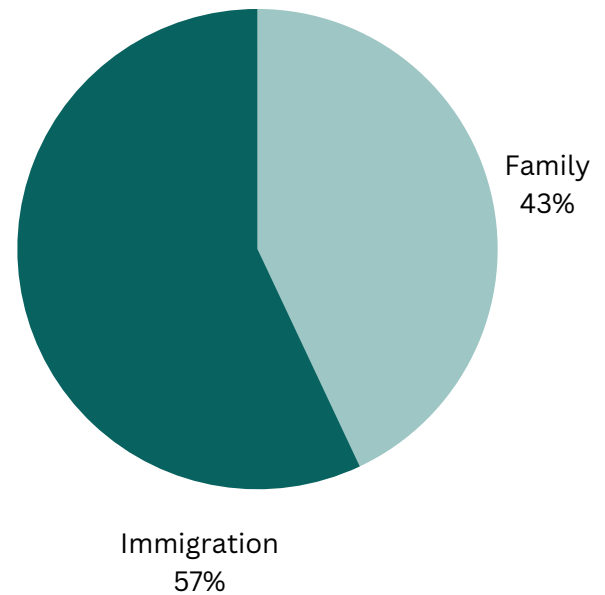
This year, we were successful in obtaining sole legal custody for a client with three minor children ages 8, 7, and 4. The children’s father, was deported over three years ago due to the domestic violence, but he returned to the United States. Prior to seeking assistance from MSP, the client’s petition was dismissed due to lack of personal service. Our client had many concerns about re-filing, specifically that her abuser would find her and hurt her or the children, however, she needed sole custody of her children in order to make important decisions regarding their medical and educational needs as well as obtaining

passports for them. We assisted her by filing a family offense petition and counseling her through her concerns. In collaboration with the assigned attorney for the children, we obtained sole custody for the client in a final order. This was a major victory for the client who is now completely free from her abuser and able to make all decisions for her children.



## Case #2

We also represented a mother (non-English speaking), in a family offense, custody/visitation, and spousal/child support matter. The parties have two children together. The father was abusive and isolated the mother for many years. He threatened her that she would lose custody of the children if she left him. He also did not allow her to work, making her completely dependent on him. We obtained sole physical custody to the mother and joint legal custody to the parties with consultation with a professional if parties did not agree. With the assistance of counsel, the parties were able to work together to reach a custody/visitation agreement that was in the best interests of the children. The agreement included “refrain from” language



**Cases by  
Legal Problem Area**

which the mother requested. In addition, we obtained spousal and child support for the mother. The father offered minimal support. After discovery, we determined the father's approximate earnings and obtained a sum that was greater than what the mother expected. The mother was very happy with our services and all the assistance MSP provided to her. With the advocacy and guidance of the attorneys at MSP, the client obtained her goals of maintaining physical custody and support for herself and her children.

## OTHER SERVICES: OVERVIEW

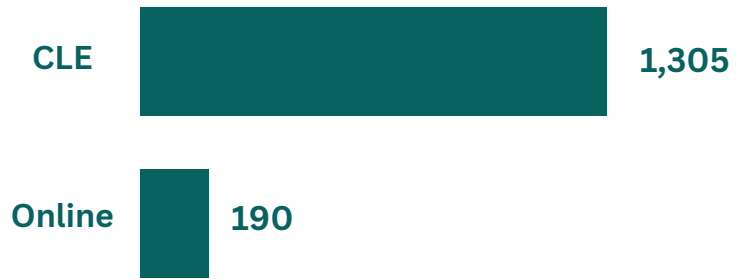
The CLS conducted 33 community presentations to 424 attendees during the reporting period. We partnered with the Human Trafficking Department for a presentation to Homeland Security Investigations (HIS), along with presentations at a Yonkers Public School and The Laboratory School in the Bronx. Additional community presentations were held for: Clifford Chance, Proskauer, NY Bar Foundation, LEO Program at NYS Judicial Institute, DVEP Summer Institute, US Department of Labor, Northern Westchester Health and Wellness Fair, Victim Assistance Services, Violence Against Women's Table Event, Hebrew Free Loan Society, and the Domestic Violence High Risk Team. For the presentations that were conducted in person we distributed our brochures (in English and Spanish), and for the virtual presentations we sent electronic versions of our brochures (in English and Spanish). Presentations were conducted in both English and Spanish depending on the group's language preference.

**1,495**  
people benefitted  
from Services  
Other Than Direct  
Legal Services

The MSP website provided materials for Pro Se Assistance for 125 inquiries. For immigration matters, these materials include links for the EOIR Automated Case Information site and USCIS Case Status site that allow clients to track their current Immigration case status. For Family law matters, these materials include links to the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and to the New York court help site which will provide individuals with information and guidance they need in the New York family courts. Additional links include Know your rights brochures in a variety of languages as well as Emergency Hotline contact information.

My Sisters' Place maintains a pro se resource page on Law Help NY on How to Claim your child on your taxes if you are a single parent. This resource includes information which parent can claim a child on a tax return, what the exceptions are, and where someone can go free income tax preparation in both New York City and Westchester County.

### Number of People Benefitted from Other Services



## OTHER SERVICES: TECHNOLOGY

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All of MSP’s legal staff are equipped with laptops, printers and headsets allowing us to work seamlessly from the office, at home or in other locations where we meet clients. MSP has invested in enhanced Wi-fi systems for both the White Plains and Yonkers locations, and everyone in the CLS has Adobe on their laptops for compiling pleadings and large immigration applications.

The CLS supervisory staff have spent significant time working with our technology consultant to upgrade our grant data collection process, which has resulted in more detailed and accurate grant reports. We continue to build staff expertise in grant management and reporting by delegating these functions to various staff members. We realize that engaging staff members in grant management and reporting is an important skill for future non-profit management professionals. Our shelter has recently converted a storage area to a resource room where residents can meet with legal staff and will soon have access to laptops which will increase access and communication with our legal staff.

## OTHER SERVICES: TRAININGS

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CLS attorneys and paralegals continue to attend CLE programs through the Practicing Law Institute and the City Bar Association, both of which provide pro bono memberships to MSP. Our attorneys also have access to ASISTA, Office on Violence Against Women, and American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) trainings.

Our immigration attorneys will be attending the three-day AILA Annual Conference in June, and our family attorneys participated in the Justice for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence Transforming and Inequitable Family Law System last fall.

Our Board participated in a staff led training on Trauma and will soon attend Undoing Racism training.

All MSP staff members will attend Undoing Racism workshops during the upcoming year. Mandatory internal MSP staff trainings include Dynamics of Domestic Violence, Confidentiality, Safety Planning, Mandatory Reporting, Suicide Prevention, Intersectionality, Deaf Culture, and Intimate Partner Violence in the LGBTQ+ community.

During the reporting period, the CLS has had presentations and trainings from Homeland Security Investigations Unit, the U.S. Department of Labor and the Social Security Administration designed to help us support our clients seeking U and T Visas.


## PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

We are fortunate to continue a long-standing relationship with a New York City law firm, recruiting, training, and deploying pro bono opportunities. We have recently signed a new one-year agreement to continue this partnership. In addition to this relationship, we have developed additional partnerships with New York City law firms and engaged in a mentorship with a Washington D.C. firm representing an individual in Immigration Court in New York City. We continue to expand our pro bono relationships and commitment to improving the program. Our relationship with a pro bono volunteer from the New York State Attorney Emeritus Program (“AEP”) has flourished. This volunteer successfully completed the training program and is now engaged in completing several assignments including U-Certifications, filing U-Visas, VAWA applications, and assisting in research necessary for successful asylum hearings.



**30 Attorneys volunteered 289 hours**

**30 Law Students volunteered 529 hours**

Each  icon is equal to 6 volunteers.  
 Attorneys are represented through the Green Figure.  
 Law Students and Other Volunteers are represented through the Grey Figure.



During the reporting period we trained 90 pro bono volunteers in Naturalization, Adjustment of Status, U-Visa, and Affidavit drafting. Pro bono volunteer assignments include:

- 30 summer associates worked on 14 Adjustment of Status applications (green card) cases.
- 18 pro bono attorneys worked on 14 U-Visa applications.
- 13 pro bono attorneys worked on 8 Naturalization applications.

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## SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

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MSP continues to work closely with local legal services providers - 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, Legal Aid Society, Sanctuary for Families, Center for Safety and Change, Catholic Charities and the Community Resource Center. With the ever-growing demand in the region straining the capacity of these non-profit organizations, several of our partners have been forced to close intake and stop accepting referrals, leaving victims without access to justice.

Along with other providers of DV services in the region, MSP has recently been impacted by a significant cut in funding from the NYS Office for Victim Services, which distributes the federal Victims of Crime Act fund to service providers in the state. This circumstance has given us an additional opportunity to collaborate with community partners at Non-Profit Westchester and the New State Coalition Against Domestic Violence as MSP, Pace Women's Justice Center, and Hope's Door have banded together to form a "Westchester Coalition." We are particularly pleased that we have come together with partner agencies to present "one voice" in advocating for funding reform that has traditionally forced us to compete with each other for the same funding, a model that is not sustainable and takes us all away from doing the work we are committed to doing.

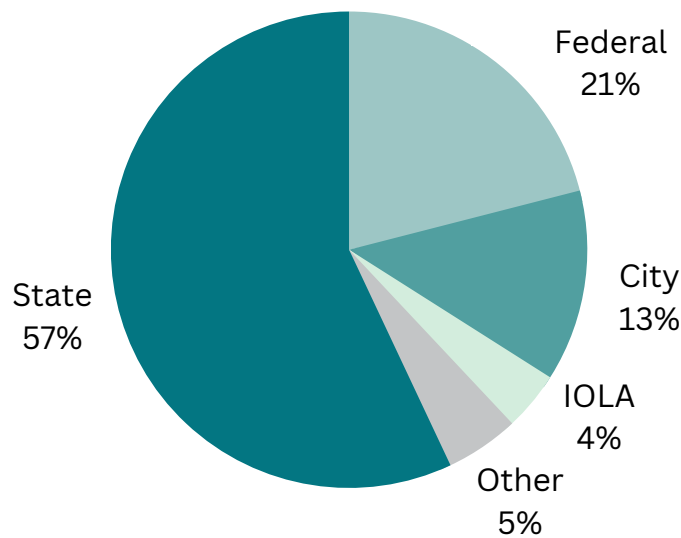
We continue to meet regularly with the Westchester County DV Council, Hudson Valley Immigration Legal Service Providers, the Westchester County Domestic Violence High Risk Team as well as the Westchester County Anti-Trafficking Task Force. MSP attorneys participate in several membership-based organizations including the Westchester Women's Bar Association, Metropolitan Black Bar Association and Non-Profit Westchester. This year we have several staff members



participating in Non-Profit Westchester’s Peer to Peer program, an affinity group for non-profit personnel of color. One of our attorneys is currently participating in Leadership Westchester, a year-long program focused on developing leadership skills. In addition, two of our attorneys continue to participate in the Her Honor mentoring program working with high school seniors from underserved communities.

## SOURCES OF FUNDING

My Sisters' Place received  
**\$2,052,390**  
 in total funding this past year



IOLA Grant	\$87,500
City and County Funding	\$260,049
Federal	\$439,017
State Funding	\$1,165,824
Other	\$100,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,052,390</b>