

NEIGHBORHOOD LEGAL SERVICES

2022-2023

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

From April 1, 2022, through March 31, 2023, Neighborhood Legal Services, Inc. (NLS) screened 7,305 cases in the five-county service area. NLS’ Buffalo office, serving Erie County, opened 2,499 and closed 4,180 cases. Our Niagara Falls office, serving Niagara County, opened 412 and closed 557 cases. Our Batavia office, located in Batavia and serving Genesee, Orleans and Wyoming counties, opened 261 and closed 426 cases. In total, our three offices opened 3,172 cases and closed 5,163 cases during the reporting period. NLS’ work impacted households containing 11,510 people, which included 4,870 children, 850 victims of domestic violence, 135 veterans and 1,836 individuals living with a disability.

Due to the efforts of our staff members, \$1,956,774 in back benefit awards and \$140,046 in monthly benefits were secured for clients during this period. Included in this amount are retroactive awards of Social Security and SSI benefits totaling \$1,469,188, and \$101,828 in monthly benefits. We also received \$152,349 in back child support awards for clients and produced monthly child support payments of \$16,813.

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



Population Served: General Low Income Population

Total Funding: \$9,907,439

Total IOLA Grant: \$1,312,607

Staffing Full Time Equivalent:

- Total Staff: 111.2
- Paralegals: 37.3
- Lawyers: 51
- Other: 22.9

providers to provide representation to an increased number of tenants facing homelessness and eviction because cases are heard virtually, each afternoon, Monday through Thursday. Additionally, we have expanded our Attorney of the Morning Programs to include Batavia, 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. NLS works collaboratively with LAB, VLP, CELJ, and WNYLC in this endeavor and acts as the clearinghouse for the majority of tenants who seek assistance through this program. We are also an active participant in the Live Well Erie eviction diversion initiative, as well as on a project to develop strategies for increasing safe affordable housing options in its community.

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, and Catholic Health/Catholic Charities.

DIRECT LEGAL SERVICES: CASES

Disability

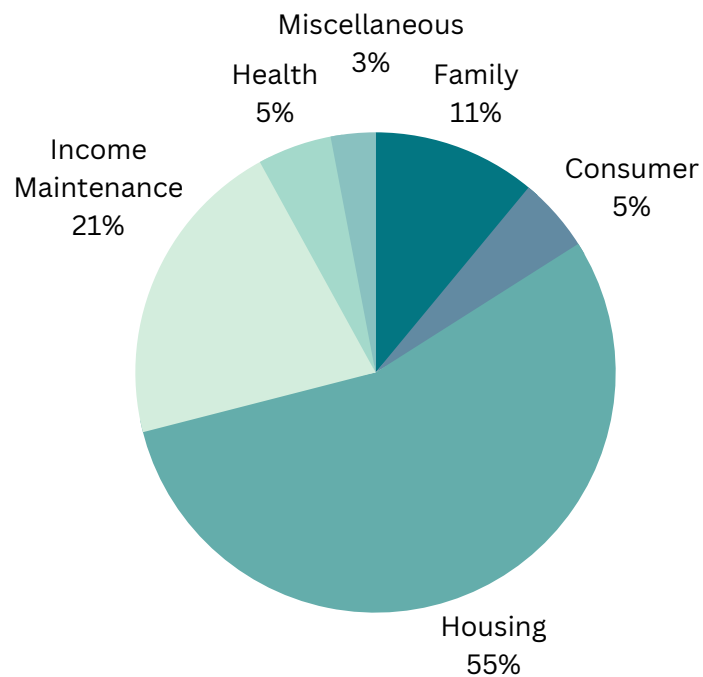
Peter was a cancer patient who was originally diagnosed in a refugee camp before coming to the United States. He was unable to work due to side effects of the cancer and his treatment. Peter applied for Supplemental Security Income through SSA before meeting with NLS on his own, despite not being able to speak English. Unfortunately, he was denied and came to us seeking assistance. As his cancer diagnosis did not automatically qualify him for benefits, Peter was left with the difficult task of demonstrating to SSA that his combination of impairments necessitated a disability finding. We called a reconsideration on his behalf, and then a hearing when the reconsideration was denied. We were successful in obtaining an award of \$22,385

in retroactive benefits along with prospective benefits for him. NLS further researched this issue and filed an internal appeal with the insurance company. Our advocate and the physical therapist supplied letters arguing that the new sleep safe bed was medically necessary. Within a week of submitting the appeal, the client received notice from his insurance company that the new sleep safe bed had been approved.

Housing

Mary’s 19-year son died from a drug overdose in the apartment they shared. Nuisance theory eviction proceedings were immediately filed against her, and she was at risk of being immediately removed from the premises she resided in for 19 years. Mary was overwhelmed. Her son had died only one week prior, she had no money to move or to secure other housing, and the pandemic was ongoing. She contacted NLS after being served with court papers. Without legal assistance, she would likely have faced homelessness. We discovered that the landlord had no desire to evict Mary. He indicated that there were no prior issues with drugs or illegal activity, and that he felt compelled to bring an eviction action by the City of Buffalo. NLS contacted the Community Police Officer responsible for appearing at court for evictions to explain that she was a long-term tenant with no prior history of illegal activity in her home. We represented Mary in the scheduled virtual court appearance, in which the landlord did not appear. NLS made several legal arguments, and reported, based upon conversations with the landlord, that he had no interest in evicting our client. The case was dismissed. Mary was able to keep her home of 19 years. As a result of our intervention and advocacy, she was spared the very real possibility of homelessness during a time when COVID was threatening the health of our nation and a time that client was grieving the loss of her son.

11,510
people
benefitted from
5,163
legal cases closed



**Cases by
Legal Problem Area**

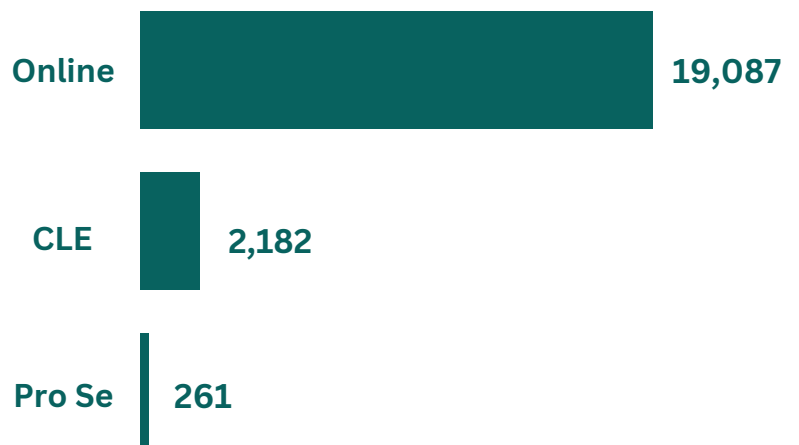
OTHER SERVICES: OVERVIEW

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 report period, we delivered 44 community legal education training sessions as either stand-alone seminars, clinics, or as part of a program or conference. There were 1,265 people who attended, 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, to amplify and standardize legal information and advice routinely delivered through the NLS intake system. In addition, NLS information letters are available on LawHelpNY.

NLS’ community legal education goal is to maximize the benefits to clients through efficient utilization of its 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 that receive the benefits of our legal expertise.

21,530
 people
 benefitted
 from Services
 Other Than
 Direct Legal
 Services

Number of People Benefitted from Other Services



OTHER SERVICES: TECHNOLOGY

NLS has integrated the use of digitally transcribed phone messages into its intake system, which allows for a more automated process that results in quicker response for potential clients. NLS also has updated segments of its website to provide users access to information relevant to specific geographic regions.

NLS is now maximizing the benefits of text messaging through LegalServer for better communication with clients, especially those who have limited minutes in their mobile phone plans, are confronting domestic violence issues or who work during the day and cannot accept an incoming call. We also can send and receive external forms in LegalServer, allowing staff to collect necessary documentation and signatures in an efficient manner. NLS uses Microsoft Office 365 and conducts internal in-service trainings on this program, SharePoint and Teams. NLS has engaged an outside agency to train management and staff on the full system. This includes on-going trainings for onboarding new and maintaining access to training resources for existing staff.

Due to the growth of the program and its staff, NLS, for the first time, hired an in-house IT Specialist who, in addition to providing support to staff, enabling a smoother provision of direct services to NLS' clients, will work on improving NLS' use of technology.

NLS will be working with a consultant on technology-support for a WNY-EPP coordinated intake system among our partners in the summer of 2023. Through the Legal Services Access Alliance and the Legal Services Corporation, Ms. Breen is working closely with LawHelpNY to create a statewide (i.e., outside of NYC) portal for eviction defense services.

OTHER SERVICES: TRAININGS

NLS provides on-going training and professional development opportunities to staff, volunteers, and board members both individually and collectively. Supervising attorneys are responsible for training staff in unit intake practices, case review procedures, and other procedural components of the particular position that is filled. NLS pays for continuing legal education in substantive law and skills development for advocacy staff, as well as computer skills training for secretarial and clerical staff. NLS has free access to Practising Law Institute's online CLE trainings and Microsoft Office's Knowledgewave library of trainings, which may be used as a foundation for in-house skills and capacity development.

NLS provides its attorney staff with the opportunity to earn all necessary CLE hours. NLS also regularly provides in-house training for staff members. Annually, all staff are required to attend a sexual harassment training and cybersecurity training. In 2022, staff attended numerous trainings for LegalServer, Microsoft 365 and Microsoft Teams, as well as case handling, lobbying, and representation of non-citizens trainings. Individualized training for staff is provided on an as-needed basis. NLS also held several Diversity & Inclusion trainings. Staff continue training in Trauma Informed Care monthly, with an average of 35 people attending per session. In January 2023, NLS hired a Director of Advocate Writing & Litigation Skills to support staff with legal writing and litigation skills on an individual and group basis.

NLS administrative staff attended trainings on issues including sexual harassment, cybersecurity, and regularly participate in human resources updates trainings. Management team members also attended trainings through ZingTrain, the Management Information Exchange and Legal Services Corporation.

PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

NLS continues to provide a contract to 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,



2 Attorneys volunteered 31 hours

10 Law Students volunteered 2,316 hours

Each  icon is equal to 1.2 volunteers.

Attorneys are represented through the Green Figure.

Law Students and Other Volunteers are represented through the Grey Figure.

training, preparing cases, telephone access and advice, and counseling attorneys about particular areas of poverty and disability law. Our staff members account for these private attorney involvement (PAI) activities in our timekeeping system. The training NLS provides to VLP volunteers who participate in the Attorney of the Morning is an example of the substantial resources we provide to pro bono attorneys within our service area. 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 Office refers cases to the private bar in its service area through its pro bono referral process. We also make extensive use of law students, particularly in the Buffalo office, due to the proximity of the University at Buffalo School of Law. 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.

SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATIONS

NLS, in partnership with VLP, continued to staff the Lawyer/Attorney of the Morning Program (AMP) at Buffalo, Lackawanna and Niagara Falls city courts, providing immediate services to tenants facing eviction in Buffalo City Court. In 2022, NLS expanded AMP to Batavia, Lockport and North Tonawanda city courts. Attorneys and landlords involved in public and subsidized tenancies are encouraged to schedule cases on days that we are present in the courtroom. Our expertise in public and subsidized housing cases is well recognized in the community, and the court often adjourns cases involving public and subsidized cases, or warranty of habitability claims to allow NLS staff to handle them.

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

NLS conducts intake with an onsite advocacy staff at the Family Justice Center and assists victims of domestic violence needing emergency protective orders. During the reporting period, NLS partnered with Child and Family Services and the Center for Resolution and Justice provide enhanced and holistic legal services for victims of crime in Erie, Niagara, and Genesee counties.

NLS has MLPs with Roswell Comprehensive Care Center, Evergreen Health and Catholic Health/Catholic Charities. These MLPs improve clients’ health by resolving health-harming legal needs and allow for a multidisciplinary team approach to problem solving.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

Neighborhood Legal Services received
\$9,907,439
 in total funding this past year

IOLA Grant	\$1,312,607
City and County	\$16,309
Foundations	\$331,073
Federal	\$5,074,766
Fundraising	\$28,955
State Funding	\$2,960,561
Other	\$183,168
Total	\$9,907,439

