

A Publication of Neighborhood Legal Services Association

A Safer and Happier Life

Lori came to NLSA for assistance with obtaining a protection-from-abuse (PFA) order against her former partner.

She was one of the first people to be helped by the new Enhanced Assessment and Emergency Legal Assistance program at NLSA. This effort pairs clients with a pro bono volunteer attorney to assess immediate legal needs and a social worker to evaluate, identify, and connect a client with local community resources to aid in steps toward leading a safer and happier life. This collaborative project of NLSA, the Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh and the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas is funded by the PA Department of Crime and Delinquency through its Victim of Crime Assistance or VOCA program.

Lori worked with her attorney to craft an order that met all of her immediate needs. "It was very scary [going through the PFA process] but peaceful at the same time because it was extremely necessary." When everything was over Lori began to realize the stark reality for almost all domestic violence victims – filing and receiving a PFA is often the easiest step in the journey.

Lori was referred to PA Women Work to help in her search for a new job since she had lost her previous job as a result of the circumstances surrounding her PFA and was eventually able to get a new full time job on her own. At the same time, Lori worked with a rehousing program for help in obtaining a security deposit and first month's rent for a new apartment where she could feel safe and secure. Lori connected with her local domestic violence agency for counseling and became a part of their empowerment program.

"All the times that someone called to check on me and my progress meant everything. It let me know that someone really cared beyond the paperwork and a job. I could never say thank you enough," she said.

The journey to creating a new life after the destruction of domestic violence is long, difficult and often very lonely. Lori never let the minor setbacks stop her. Rebecca Graban, social worker for NLSA, who worked closely with Lori said, "Her story is not unique. There are over 2 million women in America who are victims of domestic violence each year. But with adequate support and access to programs to help, she found a way to live a happier life." 🗑️



NLSA, in conjunction with the YWCA Greater Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania Women Work, has created the Women's Empowerment Initiative to provide legal services, career services, and personal support to women in sudden economic distress.



Pro bono publico—for the public good—describes legal work by volunteers, and we highlight the importance of their work in this newsletter. Pro bono volunteers allow NLSA to offer additional help to clients who otherwise would not be served. In addition to the dedicated NLSA staff attorneys, we are grateful to work with a group of equally dedicated pro bono lawyers who volunteer their time and legal expertise to help women, the elderly, veterans, and other underserved groups gain access to free civil legal aid and our system of justice.

All this work truly “takes a village”---effective volunteering as a pro bono attorney requires more than simply a desire to help.

Channeling legal expertise into direct pro bono services requires an infrastructure to provide training, back-up assistance, administrative support, continuing legal education and more. NLSA provides that foundation. Our pro bono initiatives also benefit from the Pro Bono Center of the Allegheny County Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Bar Association Pro Bono Department who assist local bar associations, legal services programs and other groups who offer pro bono legal services to expand access to justice for the neediest among us.

As we focus on pro bono in this newsletter, it's only fitting that we include a profile on Judge R. Stanton Wettick, Jr., a former executive director of NLSA and a passionate and vocal champion for free civil legal aid. Judge Wettick was recently recognized by his former law clerks at a tribute reception honoring his exceptional contributions to NLSA and our social justice system. We also bring you news about other pro bono efforts through the organization and the Enhanced Assessment and Emergency Legal Assistance program grant, a new initiative to provide help to individuals in advance of their final court proceedings, and sometimes beyond.

As we head into this holiday season, please consider honoring the work of all pro bono attorneys with a gift to NLSA, which will provide additional legal help to those in need. There are many ways to support NLSA's effort to continue its mission of equal justice under law. Visit our website for details at <https://nlsa.us/how-you-can-help-2/ways-to-give/>.

Bob Racunas



Tangled Title Program

Neighborhood Legal Services Association believes that every resident within a community has the right to stable, safe housing. However for far too many that right is threatened by tangled title situations.

A tangled title is a property title that does not accurately reflect the present homeowner's claim to the home. For instance, many children or grandchildren currently live in homes in which the deed is still in the name of the parent or grandparent. Tangled titles threaten the well being of low income residents by blocking them from obtaining critical home repairs, refinancing options, and/or homeowners' insurance. In many cases, families are forced to live with leaky ceilings, molded wood, or broken pipes because their tangled title impedes their access to public works programs. According to Peter Lewis, an attorney from Stoll Keenon Ogden PLLC and a key pro bono partner on the Tangled Title Project, “there are an estimated 4,000 tangled titles in Allegheny County and the lion's share of these are in the City of Pittsburgh.” As NLSA became increasingly aware of the problems created by tangled titles, it stepped forward to address the issue in conjunction with the Pittsburgh Pro Bono Partnership (PPBP).

“NLSA saw a need in the community and moved to create a partnership to address that need,” says Christine Kirby of NLSA. Led by Attorney Barbara Kern, NLSA partnered with Peter Lewis and Kent Boswell, of PPBP member Stoll Keenon Ogden PLLC (SKO), to work through the complicated beginnings of establishing a tangled title process in Pittsburgh. The project took inspiration from “Volunteers for the Indigent Program” (VIP), a Philadelphia based program created by Regional Housing Legal Services and other Philadelphia based PA Legal Aid Network civil legal aid programs to untangle complicated home titles. With guidance from Philadelphia's VIP and funding from PA IOLTA Foreclosure Prevention Assistance, the strong partnership of NLSA and SKO has successfully begun working with clients to untangle property titles and stabilize home ownership for low income residents.

“The issue of housing affordability is so important in Pittsburgh that an Affordable Housing Task Force was formed in 2016 to address the problem.” Peter stated, reflecting on the beginnings of the Tangled Title Project. “One of the initial findings of that Task Force was the increasing affordability gap for those earning below a certain income and the increasing risk that seniors, working families, and long-term residents will be competing for fewer and fewer affordable housing units. Our response to this was, ‘What is more affordable than the house our client already owns?’ Our goal is to help our clients, by whatever means possible, stay in the home that in many cases their family has owned and occupied for two or more generations. They are part of what makes Pittsburgh so unique and they are as entitled as anyone to be part of its future.”

Projects Making An Impact


Neighborhood Legal Services is excited to be part of two important projects in cooperation with the Pittsburgh Pro Bono Partnership, both of which have expanded the organization's ability to serve the low income community.

The Expungement Referral Project began in June 2012 because of a large number of calls NLSA was receiving for assistance in obtaining expungement of criminal charges that were preventing individuals from obtaining or improving their employment situation. The project is a Signature Project of Meyer Unkovic & Scott LLP administered by attorney Kathryn Kenyon with a large volunteer base from all partnership members. Since its inception the project has obtained expungement orders for approximately 200 NLSA clients. This number is in addition to the even larger number of clients whom NLSA attorney Edward van Stevenson has represented in expungement cases.

As the law has changed in this area, allowing for expungements in additional situations, for sealing of records in others, and requiring new forms, NLSA has provided ongoing CLE training and mentoring for all volunteers.

The Guardianship Project is NLSA's newest cooperative venture with the partnership and member firm Pietragallo Gordon Alfano Bosick & Raspanti LLP. Attorney Dan Buzard, Supervisor of the Civil Commitment, Department of Orphan's Court made NLSA aware of the increasing number of calls his department was receiving from individuals who needed to establish guardianships for disabled family members but who did not have the financial means to afford an attorney. Although NLSA had a very small guardianship referral program through its Elder Law Program, NLSA knew that program could not serve this increasing need.

The organization turned to the partnership for a cooperative venture at the same time member firm Pietragallo was looking for a Signature Project. Within a few weeks after a CLE was presented by attorneys Carol Sikov Gross and Dan Buzard, the Project had its first referral. After just two months, NLSA has opened six files for this program.

These two projects illustrate the vital need for cooperation between legal service organizations and the private bar and the goals that can be accomplished when that partnership exists. 



Final Court Date Support


For individuals heading to a final court appearance in Protection from Abuse proceedings, NLSA's new Enhanced Assessment and Emergency Legal Assistance program is ready to help.

The new collaborative project aims to offer coordinated services and specialized support to PFA victims. The social work practice, staffed by Rebecca Graban, MSW, offers assistance to individuals before their final PFA hearing by providing help in accessing benefits and connecting with existing resources in their community in an effort to help them break the cycle of abuse.

"By connecting with clients early on, we have the ability to assess and react to problems in a more proactive manner," said Graban.

Graban works in conjunction with NLSA staff attorney Morgan Moody to provide emergency legal services to clients as they file

a temporary order. From there, clients are offered further help that may include safety planning, crisis intervention and connection to resources to meet critical needs that impact their ability to move forward. According to Graban, "The issues that may have led an individual to seek legal help in the first place don't often magically disappear after a final day in court. In fact, often they become exacerbated." Graban spent 14 years in the mental health field before obtaining her Master's in Social Work from the University of Southern California.

"This program allows us to offer clients a whole new level of care, helping them achieve goals they've set for themselves and their families," she added. 

An Exemplary Pro Bono Attorney - Judge R. Stanton Wettick, Jr.

It is not surprising that a graduate of Amherst College and Yale Law School would land a job as an associate at a prestigious law firm like Kirkpatrick & Lockhart law firm (now K&L Gates), or that the same lawyer with those credentials would be hired as a law professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. What is surprising is that same talented young lawyer would leave all that behind to become the head of a newly founded civil legal aid program called Neighborhood Legal Services Association and dedicate his professional career to public service.

But that's exactly the path taken by the Honorable R. Stanton Wettick, Jr.

In 1966, NLSA was still trying to define its mission when "Tony" Wettick took control. During those early years NLSA won many victories for clients seeking procedural safeguards for housing, public benefits, and education that


made a difference in the lives of many individuals and families. Judge Wettick helped create an effective civil legal aid organization that would deliver high quality legal assistance to the poor.

He served as executive director of NLSA for seven years before being appointed to the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas in 1976 by Governor Milton Shapp. His hard work, fairness, keen intellect, and judicial temperament earned him the respect of the bar and fellow jurists. Judge Wettick handled both simple cases and complex matters in the same thoughtful and serious manner.

NLSA and its clients have been fortunate to have Judge Wettick offer his time and services as a pro bono volunteer attorney upon his retirement from the bench. His experience and wisdom has allowed him to not only help those who need it, but he has



become a valued mentor and role model to NLSA staff attorneys.

Any judge who presides over a four decade period by necessity has had many law clerks assisting in court business and decisions --but not all judges have maintained those relationships. Judge Wettick has and it is his former law clerks who planned and organized an event in his honor. 

Contact
Us

NLSA provides service to residents in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence counties.
Call toll-free: **1-866-761-6572**
Visit us online: www.nlsa.us

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