



JUSTICE MATTERS

A PUBLICATION OF NEIGHBORHOOD LEGAL SERVICES



WINTER 2020

Giving Matters Because Justice Matters

Neighborhood Legal Services' Equal Justice Campaign is an annual fundraising campaign where the entire legal profession comes together around a common cause — helping to ensure that the neediest members of our community have access to civil legal aid. Contributions made to NLS' Equal Justice Campaign enable people to obtain the justice they deserve not just what they can afford.

Over the past 32 years, our region's legal community collectively has contributed more than \$6.2 million through the Equal Justice Campaign to provide civil legal aid to the poor and victims of domestic violence. Those

receiving services made possible by the Equal Justice Campaign include the elderly, disabled individuals, veterans, children, domestic violence victims, people at risk of losing their homes, and many other people in need. In every case NLS handles, clients have reached a point of desperation because at least one of life's most basic needs - personal safety, shelter, food, warmth and/or their family unit is at risk.

Thanks to the legal community's generosity and the ongoing success of the Equal Justice Campaign, tens of thousands of low-income and disadvantaged people have been

able to get necessary legal assistance, and the justice system continues to work better for everyone. **Yet NLS is forced to turn away one out of every two eligible people who need our help.* Together, we are making our community a fairer and better place for all of us. Supporting NLS is a way to work for justice and access for all. Please consider making an annual gift to NLS' Equal Justice Campaign today!** For more information about the Equal Justice Campaign, contact our Development Office at 412-586-6140 or email support@nlsa.us

* LSC Justice Gap Report and Pennsylvania IOLTA/ Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network Documenting the Justice Gap (2017)

WAYS TO GIVE

- Donate online at www.nlsa.us/donate
- Mail your check payable to the Equal Justice Campaign, c/o Neighborhood Legal Services; 928 Penn Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222
- Text GIVING to 44-321
- Support us through the United Way of Southwestern PA Campaign by selecting Contributor Choice #534 for NLS' Equal Justice Campaign.



NEIGHBORHOOD LEGAL SERVICES

Because Justice Is For All



Woman of Excellence

NLS Attorney Donna Allen-Rosemond was recently named one of the 2019 New Pittsburgh Courier's "Women of Excellence" in recognition of her excellent legal work on behalf of victims of domestic violence. Donna is one of the region's experts in this important area of the law, dedicating her career to helping people navigate a serious crisis in their lives, while maintaining a remarkably sunny outlook herself.

One Donna legend describes the day she broke her arm in the morning, went to Court to handle her cases, and only later sought medical treatment. The "School of Donna" has trained many law students in Family Law, resulting in a network of skilled lawyers who got their start with the help of Donna and others at NLS. Donna also has

taught paralegal students for many years, as an adjunct professor at the Duquesne University Paralegal Institute. Donna was invited to participate in the Matrimonial Inns of Court and participates in many

other professional activities, always ready to learn as well as to share what she knows. Please join us in congratulating Donna Allen-Rosemond for the well-deserved honor!



Words From Penn

Mindfulness is a big buzzword these days.

At its simplest level, mindfulness means being aware, focusing and acknowledging something without finding a way to distract yourself. Practicing mindfulness might be a better way of looking at what we are grateful for or what we have that is good. For the lucky among us, that could be our health and families, having a home and job, or being a part of a community that welcomes us.

For the staff, volunteers and attorneys at Neighborhood Legal Services, what we are mindful of often extends beyond the very personal. At this time of year especially, we are grateful to have the resources and skills to be able to help people, day in and day out, to live better, safer and happier lives.

This year, NLS has served nearly 15,000 individuals. While we count individuals, we know from experience that there is a ripple impact to the help we provide. For example, a woman may be safer with a Protection From Abuse order so her children could feel

more secure as well and function better at school. A disabled vet may have a safer place to live because of benefits we have helped secure, and so might his wife or children.

We are able to do this, and more because of philanthropic contributions, private donations and volunteerism. Large or small, donations enable us to provide help at our office in Downtown Pittsburgh and in Lawrence, Butler and Beaver counties.

In addition to philanthropic contributions, attorneys are among the biggest supporters of our mission. Lawyers who recognize the important work we do give to Neighborhood Legal Services through the Equal Justice Campaign (more on that in this newsletter). Perhaps more than most, lawyers understand how important it is for underserved people to get professional help in civil legal matters. Courts and judges can be an intimidating experience for anyone, but for the most vulnerable among us, having a legal advocate on their side is invaluable. That is why over the past 32 years, the legal community collectively has contributed more than \$6.2 million to

NLS through the Equal Justice Campaign. This generosity has enabled us to leverage additional philanthropic support from local and national foundations, the business community, and social justice-minded individuals.

Despite the generosity of the legal community and the concerned public, there is never a shortage of people in need. To keep providing the services we do, fundraising will always be one of the most important things we do as well as soliciting volunteers for protection from abuse cases, debt advice clinics, translation services and other skill-specific needs such as marketing and strategic planning.

If our mission inspires you and you want to help, there are many ways to support NLS and get involved. Please visit our website to find out more: <https://nlsa.us/how-you-can-help-2/>

Best,

Bob Racunas

Expanded Expungement Help with New Partnership

Neighborhood Legal Services has been a champion of the expungement process since 2012 when the organization expanded its Employment Law Practice to help people remove legal barriers regarding employment. When NLS was founded in 1966, criminal records were not a significant barrier to employment, housing, and education. Background searches were not the same commonplace practices as they are today.

As time went on, more and more people came to NLS seeking help after denial of employment and other opportunities based on their criminal record. For the last seven years, NLS' Employment Law Project has focused on helping people with criminal record barriers into employment and helping to address the overwhelming need to assist individuals in obtaining an expungement.

Expungement, in its simplest terms, refers to the process of sealing arrest and/or conviction records so that they are

cleared (rather than destroyed or sealed) from state or federal records. While many legal experts and advocates believe that expungement, in general, can help pave the way toward employment and better housing options, more research is needed to support this theory. This way legal advocates can create stronger plans for how to make expungement easily accessible to those who need it.



NLS' Employment Law Project has focused on helping people with criminal record barriers into employment.

2019 BY THE NUMBERS

7,523 CASES HANDLED

3,259 NUMBER OF PROTECTION FROM ABUSE CASES HANDLED

7,556 PEOPLE REFERRED FOR OTHER ASSISTANCE

\$1,341,494 OF AWARDS & BENEFITS FOR CLIENTS

14,997 INDIVIDUALS SERVED

5,277 HOURS PROVIDED BY 207 PRO BONO VOLUNTEERS

48,396

LOG ONTO
WWW.NLSA.US
FOR
INFORMATION

174

OUTREACH
EVENTS

9,000+

LEGAL
INFORMATION
BROCHURES
DISTRIBUTED

With that goal in mind, NLS embarked on an innovative partnership called the Final Stage Reentry Project. They worked in conjunction with the University of Duquesne's Law School Civil Rights Clinic, students at the University of Pittsburgh's Law School, and researchers at Harvard University's Access to Justice Lab.

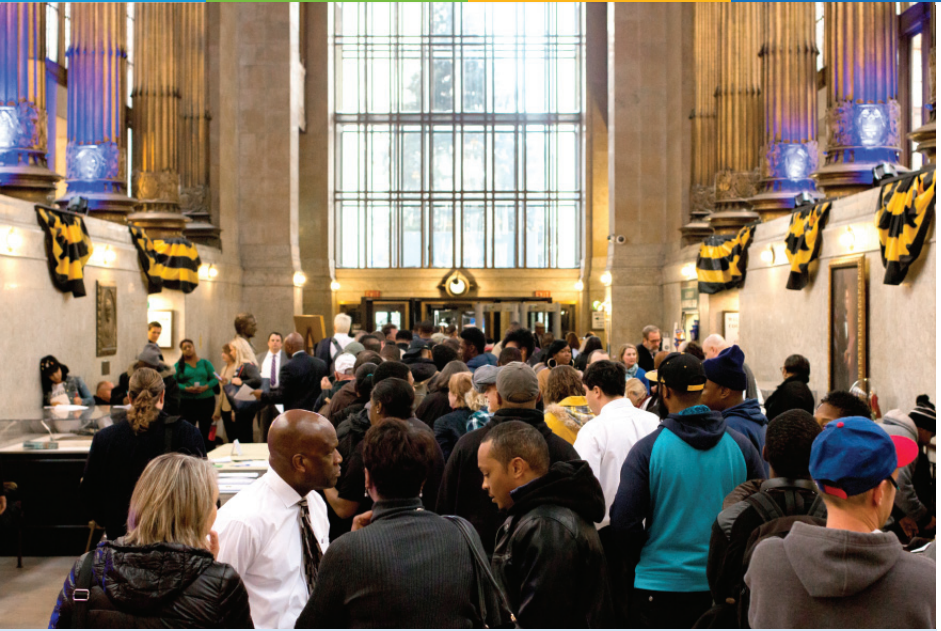
The final aim of the project is to study the effectiveness of obtaining an expungement based on housing, employment, and recidivism, including the true effectiveness of self-help representation, versus full legal representation. The project was launched with two pilot sites: one consisting of the entire state of Kansas and the other in conjunction with counties like Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, and Lawrence in southwestern Pennsylvania.

"This project is about increasing access to legal services and self-help resources, which don't require an attorney, to begin the record-clearing process, and evaluating how those approaches work, if they're effective or not, and if so, why not?" said Jennifer Modell, a staff attorney with NLS who oversees the organizations expungement area.

"Legal advocate organizations believe that expungement can help improve lives but without the data to support that belief, it's just that, and we won't be able to access available resources to see an impact on our clients," said Modell.

To learn more about NLS expungement efforts, and the Final Re-entry Project, please visit our website at www.nlsa.us or email Jennifer Modell at modellj@nlsa.us.

EXPUNGEMENT: A Fresh Start



First expungement event at City Hall. (Photo courtesy of Partners4Work.)

Expungement is defined as being when an individual's criminal record is cleared or expunged, meaning that there is no longer any record of their criminal past.

The reasons for expungement are clearly supported with nearly 1 in 3 people in the United States having a criminal record. Many only have minor convictions, with some others having been arrested but never convicted. With the rise of technology and back-

ground checks, even a minor record can cause lifelong barriers to opportunity. This often makes it impossible to get jobs or find available housing selections.

The importance of the expungement process was elevated to the national stage this past year when Pennsylvania became the first state in the U.S. to adopt Clean Slate legislation which sealed minor criminal records by the use of technology.

For help with expungement, visit www.nlsa.us and click on the Get Legal Help tab

Events Calendar

NLS offers a variety of monthly workshops, including those focused on expungement, at its locations throughout the region. For the full calendar visit <https://bit.ly/2ttdMDP>



Won't You Be Our Volunteer?

The demand for civil legal aid continues to grow as does the need for quality pro bono legal assistance. NLS staff attorneys and volunteer attorneys help nearly 15,000 people each year. Unfortunately, also each year NLS turns away 10,000 others because of lack of resources. Volunteer attorneys bridge the gap between those who need assistance and those who receive it directly from legal aid. Please consider connecting with NLS as a volunteer fighting for fairness and justice.

Represent Victims of Domestic Violence in Protection from Abuse Hearings

Last year NLS staff attorneys and pro bono volunteers helped 1,745 victims of domestic violence secure a Protection from Abuse (PFA) order. A PFA can be the first step toward freedom from domestic abuse for those who have nowhere else to turn for help. Without an attorney to guide them through the process, survivors can feel re-victimized by the emotional and financial drain of obtaining a PFA. To volunteer, please contact Mary Ann Troper-Malley at 412-586-6134 or via email troperma@nlsa.us.

Make a Difference by joining Justice Rising Advocates

**LEADERSHIP
OPPORTUNITY**

As a group, **Justice Rising Advocates** for Neighborhood Legal Services engages the region's young professionals by broadening their understanding of civil legal aid and why Neighborhood Legal Services' advocacy is crucial to the fight for access to justice for all. This is your opportunity to lead, network and make a difference. NLS invites you to share your knowledge, apply your skills, volunteer, and learn from legal, business and community leaders. As individuals, **NLS Justice Rising Advocates** are committed to advancing the mission of NLS as they rise in the community and their careers. Get involved on the ground floor of this exciting new initiative! For more information, contact Julia Marasco at 412-586-6140 or via email at marascoj@nlsa.us



WHERE TALENT MEETS PURPOSE

NLS works with [Catchafire.org](https://www.catchafire.org), a skills-based non-profit organization that connects pro bono professionals looking to donate their skills through one-hour phone calls and/or fully-fledged projects. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/2PxbvA8> or contact Christine Kirby, NLS Development Director at 412-586-6137 via email at support@nlsa.us.

DON'T DELAY! GET INVOLVED! VOLUNTEER TODAY!

A Fair Chance at Employment

When it comes to poor decisions, it is safe to say that we have all been there. However, what do you do when those bad decisions are still affecting you thirty years later? Getting your life back on track does not come easily in a lot of cases, especially if those bad decisions resulted in an arrest and criminal charges. However, legal assistance and remedies do exist to those who need them which can be the difference between moving forward or being trapped in the cycle of perpetual unemployment.

Rena, a grandmother in her late fifties, was living with two children over the age of eighteen in her household, surviving on an average annual income of around \$17,000. Although she was registered with an employment service, she had been attempting to find employment for about a year without success. Employers were exploring her background and discovering items on her record that by law were no longer admissible based on the time that had passed. Rena doesn't deny that she had made some bad decisions in her teens and twenties, with records that dealt with retail theft and substance abuse.

She came to Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS) after seeing a flyer one of her students had in the

Wednesday night Sunday school class she taught. The flyer detailed how free expungement help was available. Attorney Ed Van Stevenson met Rena and explained that with his help they could expunge these records from over thirty years ago. This meant that employers would not be prejudiced or have a pre-confirmed bias in the interview process.

To Rena, as well as most of the general population, the word "expungement" was an unfamiliar term. "Expungement" is the process of going to court to ask a judge to seal a criminal record. After a record is sealed, criminal charges do not show up in a criminal background check. Ed set the process in motion, and within a period of twenty-six weeks

he successfully expunged her criminal record. This meant that employers could focus on her efforts to turn her life around rather than on the poor decisions of her youth.

Today, Rena is registered with a home health care service and supports herself and her family. Thanks to everyone involved at NLS, she has come to the realization that hope does exist for people in situations similar to hers. Everyone deserves a chance to start fresh with a clean slate, and NLS is the guiding light.



Contact Us

NLS provides service to residents in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence counties.

Call toll-free: **1-866-761-6572**

Visit us online: **www.nlsa.us**

Sign up for more information via email!



**IMPACT FUND
AWARD FOR
EXCELLENCE**

NLS' United Way Contributor Choice number is #2761 and our Equal Justice Campaign Contributor Choice number is #534.

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for Equal Justice
LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION

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