

JUSTICE MATTERS

SPRING 2017

A Publication of Neighborhood Legal Services Association

Transforming Lives



NLSA reduces domestic violence by helping victims achieve independence and escape violent situations.

Each year, NLSA staff and pro bono attorneys help over 1,000 vulnerable individuals obtain PFAs (protection from abuse orders) so that they can live their lives without fear, uncertainty and pain.


Below is an excerpt from a letter written by a client who obtained a PFA with the help of a NLSA pro bono attorney and how that experience helped change her life.

I wanted to convey what was so powerful about the whole experience. It wasn't any one thing you said then, although they certainly mattered to me later, but it was the fact that so many of you showed up, that you were there. I know I said that I didn't expect the system to work, that it hadn't worked in the past and, to be quite honest, I had met people who had said abuse wasn't okay but had never met anyone who actually had done anything about it.

When I sought a PFA, I feared that I was making the worst mistake of my life but it was actually one of my best decisions. It was because of you who believed such things shouldn't happen that I was able to say to my father – who actually began that very afternoon telling me I should reconcile with my husband who had repeatedly tried to and threatened to kill me – that I didn't think divorce was worse than murder and that if I didn't get away I feared I would be dead and that wasn't okay with me.

I'm not even sure I believed it when I said it to my father, but I believed that some of you believed it, and that gave me hope enough to say it. So I know that I don't speak for everyone, but in my opinion, the greatest value you bring is not in any one thing you say or do, but by your mere presence in proving to people like me that dragons can be tamed. And because you believed it, I believe it too.

Thank you!

NLSA provides essential support for the pro bono work by screening cases for merit and eligibility as well as training and mentoring attorney volunteers. To volunteer to make a difference in the life of a domestic violence survivor, please contact Mary Ann Troper-Malley at troperma@nlsa.us. 



Words from Penn



Dear Friend,

For the thousands of neighbors in our communities who are facing a life crisis of some kind every day, the most powerful and effective kind of help is professional legal aid.

This does not necessarily mean a lawyer in a courtroom; in fact, here at NLSA, most cases are resolved without a trial. But knowledgeable guidance through a complex legal system, even something as simple as using the legal information on our website or www.palawhelp.org, can provide the help, advice and influence that means the difference between winning—and losing everything. It's not just about justice for the most vulnerable like children, seniors, veterans, or victims of domestic violence. Civil legal aid provided by NLSA attorneys and volunteers makes the justice system fairer and more accountable for everyone.

NLSA receives nearly 30 percent of its funding from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). LSC is the single largest funder of civil legal aid for low-income Americans in the nation. Established in 1974, LSC operates as an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that promotes equal access to justice and provides grants for high-quality civil legal assistance to low-income Americans. LSC distributes more than 90 percent of its total funding to 133 independent nonprofit legal aid programs with more than 800 offices. However, ongoing funding remains uncertain.

Recently, founding member of NLSA and former Governor Thornburgh, penned an op-ed in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* in support of funding for legal aid programs like NLSA. He noted that “clients who may be facing wrongful evictions, mortgage foreclosures, wage claims, child custody disputes or denial of essential benefits often arrive at legal aid offices in crisis, often with court hearings in a matter of hours or days. They are, overwhelmingly, single mothers, seniors, veterans and people with disabilities. In difficult economic times, families once considered middle class may suddenly find themselves in need of legal aid, and poor enough to qualify for services.”

I am buoyed by the support of Governor Thornburgh and people like you who believe in our work. We encourage you to take the time to read about some of our strongest community supporters in this newsletter and learn how we carefully and strategically use generous corporate and foundation support to help make us more efficient, productive, and better able to serve those that need it most.

Thank you,

Bob Racunas, Esq., Executive Director

Serving Domestic Violence Survivors

Thanks to a grant from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's Victims of Crime Act Federal Fund, NLSA has teamed up with the Women's Center and Shelter to provide enhanced assessment and emergency legal assistance to individuals seeking relief under Pennsylvania's Protection from Abuse Act and Protection of Victims of Sexual Violence or Intimidation Act. This initiative provides for an expansion of existing legal services, which were previously only available to individuals at the time of their final hearings.

Located on site at the Allegheny County Family Division, the Women's Center and Shelter's new Safety and Information Specialist will administer lethality assessments to individuals seeking PFA orders. Lethality assessments are part of an innovative strategy designed to prevent domestic violence homicides and serious injuries.

The Safety and Information Specialist will work with court staff to refer cases to Morgan Moody, the NLSA VOCA staff attorney. Attorney Moody will focus her efforts on cases where the victim might not be sure about whether a PFA is the appropriate remedy as well as cases which are given a high priority under the project involving those with Limited English Proficiency, the elderly, victims of human trafficking, and those who have a high risk of lethality.

After obtaining the clients' consent, Attorney Moody will then refer clients to Rebecca Graban, VOCA Social Worker and NLSA's newest staff member, who will contact them to provide additional assistance. This will more specifically serve as follow up for their legal issue, but it could also include anything ranging from help with utilities, transportation, information on custody, childcare, or with relocation and finding safe housing.

“My job is to link clients to resources that can help them,” said Graban from inside Moody's office located at the Family Division just down the hall from the waiting room. This short term follow up is designed to make sure no case falls through the cracks from the time an individual has his or her temporary hearing until the day he or she is scheduled for a final PFA hearing. Allowing Allegheny County victims of crime to now have someone to contact if anything incident to their PFA should later arise.

Allegheny County has one of the highest rates of homicide for domestic violence victims in the state. “So, what we are trying to do is to not only decrease that lethality rate, but also make sure people who do need PFAs are not being deterred from getting them or ultimately withdrawing them, but are being protected,” Moody said.

First Ever Expungement Day Held in Pittsburgh

Leaving barriers to jobs and housing behind

A minor mistake made years ago shouldn't be a barrier to employment. But until recently that was the case for hundreds of individuals in Allegheny County alone.

Last fall, Governor Wolf signed into law a bill that would allow for the expungement of misdemeanor offenses from an individual's record. To commemorate the event, NLSA joined with Partner4Work, Duquesne University School of Law, the Allegheny Bar Association and PA Career Link at the City-County Building to host a part job fair and part free legal advice event for some 500 job seekers looking to start the record sealing process at no cost.

Anyone who has ever been charged with an offense, whether or not those charges were withdrawn or never resulted in a conviction, still has a record which others, including employers, can see. It is only through the expungement process that those charges, and now misdemeanor offenses, can be removed from public view. Although law enforcement officials still have access to sealed records, employers and landlords will not, thus removing a major obstacle to finding employment or housing.

"There are people who are eligible to have their record expunged after a certain period of time but don't know that and don't know how to go through this process," said Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. "We have so many jobs that need to be filled in Western Pennsylvania and there are people who need jobs. So imagining these two together to me is a win-win for everybody." According to Pam Dalton-Arlotti, Director of Program Performance and Compliance for NLSA, the expungement process goes a long way toward wiping the slate clean for individuals who committed minor offenses, paid their dues and are looking for a way to start a new life.

"Before, individuals were hampered in efforts to find work or housing because they had a conviction on their records," said Dalton-Arlotti. "But now with the new law, those records are no longer public, allowing people who want a job or a better place to live, the freedom to do so without being penalized or judged."



NLSA is working to implement an automated system to streamline the expungement process developed by Community Legal Services in Philadelphia. These kinds of improvements are important because says Dalton-Arlotti, "Everyone deserves a fair shot at a good job and a better place to live." ♣

Thank you to Partners4Work; portions of this article appeared in their newsletter: <http://www.partner4work.org/news/expungement-day/>.



Volunteer Attorneys Making a Difference


Neighborhood Legal Services Association considers providing safety and hope to victims of domestic violence an extremely important and vital service. As a paralegal for NLSA, Mary Ann Troper-Malley is primarily responsible for the important task of assigning those participating in the Protection from Abuse Pro Bono Referral Program to represent victims of domestic violence at their protection from abuse final hearings.

"We are always in need of more volunteers as this is an area where the volume and need for assistance is ever increasing," said Troper-Malley.

NLSA conducts trainings twice a year on how to handle PFA cases and provides mentoring for pro bono volunteer attorneys throughout the process as needed. Malpractice coverage is also provided for any referred case and shadow opportunities can be arranged.

These hearings are held in Room 3030 in the Allegheny County Family Court Facility, 440 Ross Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15219 and each volunteer can select convenient dates in advance for which they can represent clients.

Anyone interested in taking part in this program

or in need of additional information, contact Mary Ann Troper-Malley at troperma@nlsa.us or call (412) 586-6134. For any other volunteer opportunities, visit www.nlsa.us for more information. 




New Case Management System Launches Thanks to Richard King Mellon Foundation Grant

NLSA was recently awarded a \$116,000 grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation to complete the integration of a legal triage system. That system was developed in partnership with Five Star Development volunteers during Steel City Codefest, an event dedicated to providing simple, implementable technology solutions for Pittsburgh area nonprofit organizations.

The integration with the new case management software, LegalServer, will allow NLSA to better serve over 20,000 low-income clients annually in the Southwestern Pennsylvania counties of Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence.

According to Amy Carpenter, Intake Coordinator for NLSA, legal triage systems have evolved over the years, "...from simple paper documents to telephone helplines which, while helping us improve efficiency, also increased our caseloads." Now, along with LegalServer, "we can more effectively and efficiently manage complex intake protocols," she added.

Expected to be fully operational by the summer of 2017, the integration of the triage system with LegalServer will allow individuals who appear eligible for NLSA services based on their triage responses to be directed to complete an online intake.

Generous foundation, civic and community support was instrumental in the purchase of the LegalServer system, including grants from the BNY Mellon UpPrize competition, Forbes Funds, Legal Services Corporation, PA IOLTA and the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, and most recently, the Richard King Mellon Foundation grant. "We are so appreciative of the funding community who has helped make this improved system possible. They recognize the importance of our mission, and the delicate balance it is to provide those services to people who need them the most," said Carpenter. 

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

Funded, in part, by the Commonwealth and through a contract with the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). The official registration and financial information of the Neighborhood Legal Services Association may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free within Pennsylvania 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement. Federal regulations applying to NLSA require that we notify all donors that no funds can be expended by NLSA for any activity prohibited under P.L.104-134 or otherwise prohibited by 45 C.F.R. § 1600 et seq. 