

# JUSTICE MATTERS

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NEIGHBORHOOD  
LEGAL SERVICES

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SUPPORTING RESIDENTS OF ALLEGHENY, BEAVER, BUTLER AND LAWRENCE COUNTIES

## Pandemic Forces Legal Aid to Think Outside the Box

Neighborhood Legal Services' attorney Meghan Tighe took her role as a lawyer to a new level once COVID-19 put a halt on most legal actions. Her client Candace was experiencing a difficult situation with her landlord when he changed the locks on her apartment before she was able to completely move out. Although Candace was already in the process of moving somewhere else, belongings like her child's clothes were left behind in the locked apartment.

In normal circumstances, an attorney would file an injunction ordering the landlord to allow the tenant back into the property to retrieve their belongings. However, in times like these, attorneys need to think on their feet in hopes of settling these issues outside of court. The landlord believed that he had won the argument and case against the tenant who had not been paying rent. Until Tighe explained that there was still a hearing to come on the matter, he believed he was in the right.

She negotiated an agreement with the landlord where she would accompany Candace to the apartment, since he demanded a constable be present, which could not happen at this time, to make sure that she could safely retrieve her belongings.

“In this situation, I had to scramble and do something different to still try and help outside of normal circumstances [and things] that we normally do. With the courts being arguably closed, I had to intervene myself to settle this issue as quickly and easily as possible,” said Tighe.

Once she was able to arrange a time for everyone to meet, Tighe made sure Candace was able to get in and monitored the situation to ensure everything went smoothly. Tighe successfully helped another NLS client by going above and beyond to safeguard Candace and her child.



# NLS Launches New Website



With the official launch of Neighborhood Legal Services' new website, visitors can move through the site more easily than ever before to find information, apply for legal aid and get the help they need.

The re-designed website features a new Legal Wellness Check Up tool. The Legal Wellness Check Up provides users the opportunity to assess their legal health by identifying possible areas of legal risk such as housing instability, consumer debt or family matters, and provides referral information about community resources to help avoid a potential legal crisis. Once visitors click on the Legal Wellness Check Up tool they are asked a series of simple questions where they click on an appropriate answer and based on their responses, the Legal Wellness Check Up tool will direct them to help through NLS or refer them to other community resources.

"This is an exceptional new feature to our website, not only because it helps people identify their areas of potential legal risk but also what needs to be done to mitigate those risks. That feature can be incredibly helpful to someone who is in danger of losing their home, or benefits, or is having issues with a spouse or partner," explained Dana Crawford, a Public Ally who worked with legal aid staff to launch the new website and Legal Wellness Check Up tool.

If NLS is unable to help, the Legal Wellness Check Up will refer them to other resources such as a domestic abuse hotline number, housing discrimination help or a lawyer referral service. "If NLS can't help, we want to make sure people aren't turned away and can find other resources they need," added Crawford.

NLS gratefully acknowledges the Eden Hall Foundation for their support.



## Words From Penn

I think like most of us, I've given in to those occasional thoughts about terrible things that could befall me or my family. A natural disaster, an accident or a major illness usually top the list. In my darkest scenarios though, a global pandemic was never on my radar.

But here we are in the late spring of 2020 and the coronavirus has put all of us in an unimaginable place. For those lucky enough to still be employed and blessed with a paycheck and benefits, the pandemic is frightening yes, but likely we feel we'll get through to the other side. However, for many of our clients, often the most vulnerable among us, navigating their usual lives is challenging enough without the compounding factors of a pandemic.

In order to continue to help those that need it the most, our staff attorneys have had to

quickly mobilize and adapt. Luckily, through generous donations and support of our funders, we have been able to invest in such tools as Legal Server, online triage and intake systems, and the Legal Wellness Check Up tool before the pandemic struck and so we've been better equipped to pivot our services to online or virtual platforms. While most county court systems moved to video and teleconferencing, others are still requiring in person hearings. The efforts of those attorneys who have had to attend those in-person court dates speak to the dedication they have for their work and clients.

So, at some point, the question will be what's next? As shelter-at-home orders ease and we gradually see a return to "normal" life, we anticipate a big increase in demand for services, particularly as more middle-class Pennsylvanians will now suddenly be eligible for free legal assistance to help address emerging issues. All legal aid programs in Pennsylvania have

already been informed that the fiscal year allocation beginning July 1 will be reduced. Unfortunately, this will occur just at the time we expect to see more client demand.

In this newsletter, we'll share news about how our hard-working staff attorneys, administrators and volunteers have dedicated themselves to helping clients in this challenging time. We hope you'll consider supporting our efforts through a donation to Neighborhood Legal Services or through a United Way contribution. Our contributor choice numbers are 534 and 2761. There is always a great need for free civil legal aid and that's never more true than right now.

Stay safe and well and I look forward to writing again in a brighter place,

Bob

# Susan Abramowich Managing Attorney, Family Law

## Helping Families Navigate Lives During the Pandemic

As managing attorney for family law at Neighborhood Legal Services, Susan Abramowich oversees all family law attorneys and services at NLS offices. She works closely with family law and Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) attorneys in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence counties to coordinate services and create a cohesive approach to how NLS works with clients to deliver services. As Abramowich explained, prior to her appointment, there was no managing attorney role in family law, "But it was important to have all our offices work together for advice, best practices and access to resources." This unified approach has never been more important than during the pandemic when in-person meetings have for the most part been eliminated and replaced with Zoom or Skype meetings.

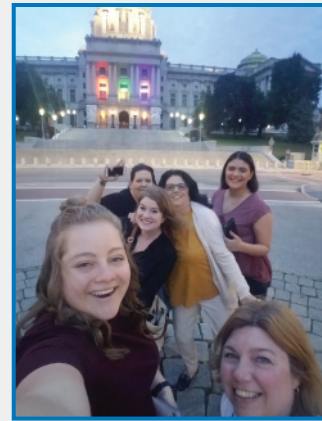
We recently spoke to Abramowich about how the pandemic has impacted the family law services at NLS and her thoughts on the challenges ahead.

### ***What are some of the biggest challenges to delivering services to families during the pandemic?***

The biggest challenges are practical, for example, meeting with clients, helping them to access services, understanding that they are dealing with income, transportation, and childcare challenges. But when you add in all these concrete challenges to families (whether intact or separate) who are already under stress, the situation becomes explosive, exacerbated, or desperate. Suddenly, cases that have been relatively "status quo" are bickering and going back and forth about custody exchanges and if appropriate precautions are being exercised.

### ***Were you prepared for the challenges and if so, how?***

Luckily, we had warnings from jurisdictions impacted by the pandemic before we were. We expected an increase in domestic violence and a likely decrease in filings and this has

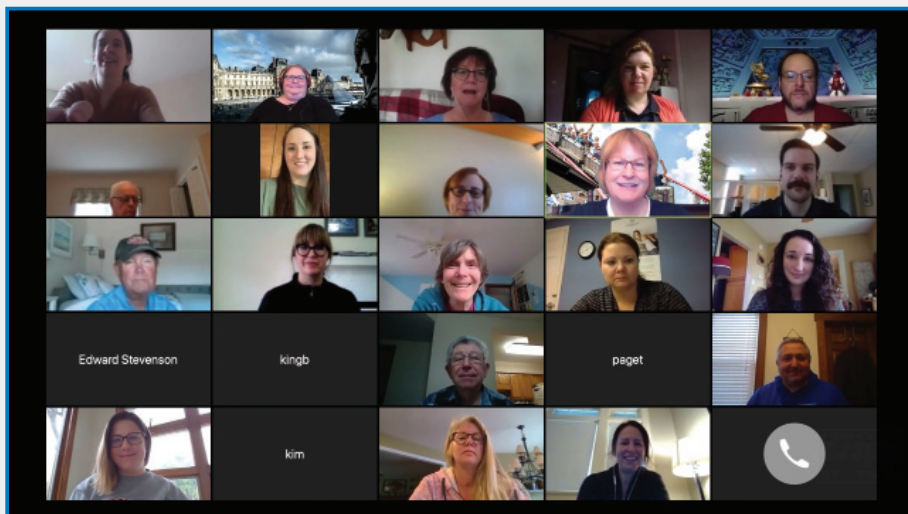


*Susan Abramowich, lower right, attending a pre-pandemic meeting in Harrisburg with NLS colleagues.*

indeed been the case, not only here in the Pittsburgh region, but nationally, even globally as well. The custody questions were less anticipated since so much focus is placed upon domestic abuse (including child and animal abuse which also likely increase during this time). Most surprises have been positive... the court administration responded quickly, the staff adapted efficiently, meetings and dialogue among local practitioners and judges increased, information shared on state and local level has been prolific and helpful.

### ***Are the challenges for delivering services different by counties?***

Allegheny County is ahead of the pack in many ways. The President Judge quickly responded and moved all operations remote, utilizing advanced communication technology when necessary. The county already had many technological advances including an online Department of Court Records, e-filing, and audiovisual equipment. Some outer, more rural counties do not have online court documents and the technical equipment necessary to respond as quickly. However, many of our attorneys are taking advantage of such tools as Legal Server that allow for electronic document signing, lessening the need for in-person meetings. And like almost all industries, we are all experts in Zoom meetings now as the courts, the bar and professional organizations have moved to virtual formats. And of course, old-fashioned phone calls are making a comeback.



*NLS staff meeting, the Zoom way.*

# Volunteer Opportunities at Neighborhood Legal Services

Volunteers and financial support will be more critical than ever as our region emerges from weeks of stay-at-home orders and we anticipate seeing a deluge of client requests regarding eviction, PFA's, employment and veterans benefit issues and more.

In this section, we have included various volunteer opportunities currently available in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, and Lawrence counties. Find one, or several, that complement your passion. For more information on any of NLS's pro bono volunteer opportunities, email us at [support@nlsa.us](mailto:support@nlsa.us) or visit the volunteer section of our website: [www.nlsa.us/volunteer/](http://www.nlsa.us/volunteer/) to sign up today.

## COVID-19-RELATED VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, we are currently in need of pro bono volunteers to assist attorneys with PFA cases once the courts reopen. If you are interested in helping the most vulnerable during this crisis visit [www.nlsa.us/covid-19/](http://www.nlsa.us/covid-19/) for more information.

NLS thanks Global Links for providing free masks and gloves to clients who need them so that they can continue to safely attend court appearances during the COVID-19 crisis.

## ALLEGHENY COUNTY

- **Family Law Telephone Advice Pro Bono Project** needs volunteers to provide telephone advice on custody matters. For more information, please contact Pamela

Dalton-Arlotti at 412.586.6104 or via email at [Dalton-arlottip@nlsa.us](mailto:Dalton-arlottip@nlsa.us).

- Participate in a **short-term task force to institutionalize/ expand the NLS Arbitration Pro Bono Program**. Attorneys who serve on an arbitration panel in Allegheny County can designate their fee be paid directly to NLS. Working with our program partners, NLS is looking for volunteers familiar with the processes to help us improve and institutionalize this program. To volunteer, contact Christine Kirby at 412.586.6137 or via email at [kirbyc@nlsa.us](mailto:kirbyc@nlsa.us).
- **Elder Law Project** needs volunteers to handle small estate cases. For more information, please contact Barbara Kern at 412.586.6138 or via email at [kernb@nlsa.us](mailto:kernb@nlsa.us).

## BEAVER COUNTY

- Beaver County attorneys interested in volunteering to assist low-income families are invited to contact Nikki Christopher at 724.598.4184 or via email at [christophern@nlsa.us](mailto:christophern@nlsa.us)

## BUTLER COUNTY

- Participate in the **Landlord/Tenant Pro Bono Referral Program** and provide representation of tenants in eviction proceedings before a Magisterial District Justice.
- Accept a Custody Referral and **provide representation in a custody action before the Court of Common Pleas** of a custodial parent whose child has just been

snatched or who has been sued for custody. For more information, contact Nikki Christopher at 724.598.4184 or via email at [christophern@nlsa.us](mailto:christophern@nlsa.us)

## LAWRENCE COUNTY

- **Provide one hour of free service for the elderly**. Volunteers are needed for up to one (1) hour of pro bono advice and limited service in the following civil matters for indigent persons' age 60 or older:
  - Divorce, custody, support and PFA issues
  - Landlord/Tenant and real estate law
  - Debtor/creditor, bankruptcy and consumer law
  - Estates, guardianships, and adoptions
  - Civil litigation, personal injury, and contract disputes
  - Social Security, workers' compensation, unemployment compensation, pensions and insurance issues
  - Employment issues
- Volunteer to **prepare documents for the elderly**. Pro Bono attorneys prepare wills, living wills and/or powers of attorney for indigent persons' age 60 or older. Interested volunteers should contact Nikki Christopher at 724.598.4184 or via email at [christophern@nlsa.us](mailto:christophern@nlsa.us)

## 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](http://www.nlsa.us)

**Sign up** for more information via email!

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

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 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 NLS require that we notify all donors that no funds can be expended by NLS for any activity prohibited under P.L. 104-134 or otherwise prohibited by 45 C.F.R. § 1600 et seq.