

JUSTICE MATTERS

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SUPPORTING RESIDENTS OF ALLEGHENY, BEAVER, BUTLER AND LAWRENCE COUNTIES

Without a Title, Elderly Client Could Lose Her Home

After spending years taking care of her elderly father, Agnes* was left with a home but not the title to ownership when he passed away. Their family home in the West End of Pittsburgh was in desperate need of repair but without a title, re-financing was out of reach.

NLS housing attorney Daniel Haller helped Agnes secure the title to the home by helping her obtain her father's death certificate and locating numerous family members who needed to be notified before she was able to move forward with transferring the title to her name.

“ Our housing cases have traditionally been about mortgage foreclosure issues but here, the title is still in the name of a deceased parent. In many of these cases, there are other heirs who have potential ownership interests that we must address first, ” said Haller.

Since gaining the title, Agnes has been able to negotiate payment plans to make her debt manageable and utilize social services for future repairs on her home.

“I don't know what I would have done without the help of Neighborhood Legal Services. Every step of the way they were available to explain things to me, get the necessary paperwork and finally, the title to my home. I'll be forever grateful, ” she said.



Hilltop Alliance Partnership Helps Untangle Tangled Title Issues

A tangled title is a simple concept to explain once you take away the legal language.

“Tangled titles exist when someone residing in a property believes themselves to be the homeowner but isn’t actually the homeowner of record. This often happens when a family member passes away and ‘leaves’ the home to someone, a friend or a relative, but never actually transfers title into their name,” explains Mallory Verez, an NLS program associate.

NLS clients typically don’t even know there’s an issue with a home title until they apply for a weatherization program, a nonprofit home repair grant, or attempt to negotiate a payment plan for delinquent mortgages or taxes. To access any of these, a person needs to be the legal homeowner.

To help reach more people and communities that may be experiencing tangled title issues, NLS embarked on a partnership that started last summer with the Hilltop Alliance, an organization dedicated to preserving and creating assets in the Hilltop (Allentown) community through collaboration and coordination of resources.

Tangled titles can take time to resolve and so when the pandemic struck, it was a setback in terms of moving cases along for clients.

But now the effort is back up and running with court safety protocols in place. “Many of our clients are elderly and so explaining the process of a tangled title and resolving it over the phone was challenging. We’re eager to begin again – with safety protocols in place - and help clients find reassurance in their home ownership titles,” said Verez.



Words From Penn

As we head into six months of a global pandemic, I’ve spent more time than ever before thinking about what I’m grateful for in my life. Good health and family top the list, but I also feel fortunate to have been able to enjoy the same home for 43 years with my wife and my family before we downsized a year ago. I’ve never experienced the dread of being kicked out of my home. But eviction fear is a reality for the more than eleven million renter households that could be served with eviction papers over the next four months. In this newsletter, we’ll look at what Neighborhood Legal Services is doing

to address what many experts are calling a “tsunami” of evictions.

Like many organizations dedicated to helping under-served communities, we braced for this coming disaster in many ways including identifying funding for adding staff attorneys to address housing needs; partnering with like-minded organizations to find people facing evictions; and working to distribute clear and accessible information throughout the counties we serve. Inside these pages, you’ll learn more about how we helped put ‘boots on the ground’ at one county we serve by having housing attorneys on-site as clients came in looking for help in fighting evictions.

Of course, we can’t do this alone. Through generous grants, donations and volunteer time, NLS attorneys are working tirelessly to maintain client contact and provide a high level of service during pandemic-related disruptions. We’ve begun to accept this new normal is going to be here for a while – so we ask your continued support in helping us keep our clients safe at home.

I wish you and your family continued health and safety.

Best,

Housing Legal Help Where Clients Need It Most – in the Court Room

NLS is rolling out an innovative new program to address housing insecurity faced by many low-income families by providing legal representation in landlord/tenant complaints. This pilot program implements a tenant-right-to-counsel initiative where civil legal aid attorneys will be on-site at several Magisterial District Justice courts throughout Allegheny County to offer legal advice, negotiation, and representation at the locations where tenants must appear for eviction proceedings. In other counties, legal representation may continue to be available when a client contacts NLS in advance of their physical evictions.



According to Attorney Eileen Yacknin, NLS's Litigation Coordinator, "There is a growing recognition around the country that adequate legal representation is essential to help prevent the forcible eviction of individuals and families from their homes, the harmful social and economic consequences of which are as grave, if not graver, than the consequences of incarceration. Through this pilot program, NLS hopes to expand its ability to help tenants by providing legal assistance to financially eligible tenants by offering same-day legal representation directly at the eviction hearing sites. "

Yacknin helped lead NLS's effort to develop and secure funding for NLS's expanded eviction prevention and advocacy efforts which included hiring six additional attorneys to provide legal help to individuals facing evictions and other legal problems that resulted from the COVID-19 public health crisis. NLS is also launching a Judicare program in Beaver, Butler and Lawrence Counties to expand the availability of legal services to people facing evictions, foreclosure, credit problems and other legal problems stemming from the current coronavirus pandemic.

POSTERS AND INFOGRAPHICS HELP TELL THE STORY

In addition to on-site attorney help when possible, NLS is working to inform clients about their housing rights with the development of brochures and posters that help break down the sometimes-complicated issues of eviction. NLS attorney Kristine Bergstrom helped to create the brochures and posters that explain the eviction moratorium and how and when tenants can be evicted. Separate fliers were created for the four counties NLS serves - Allegheny, Lawrence, Butler and Beaver.

"We were able to update the poster several times as various moratoriums were extended and we created some compelling graphics as well so that they were more likely to be leveraged on social media platforms," said Bergstrom. Judging by the number of community groups and organizations that shared the brochures on their own websites or social media channels, the effort was a success.

For posters and other up-to-date information and news on rights and resources for Pennsylvanians dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic, visit the COVID-19 Resource on the NLS website. www.nlsa.us/covid-19

DATA SHOWS AN EVICTION TSUNAMI IS COMING

According to a new interactive tool created by the global advisory firm Stout Risius Ross, LLC, over sixteen million renter households are at risk of eviction, and more than eleven million renter households could be served with eviction papers over the next four months. To provide some perspective, prior to the pandemic, roughly 2.3 million households typically received eviction papers in an entire year, according to the Eviction Lab, a nationwide database of evictions.

"This data shows us that all the terms people have been using to describe what's coming – 'cliff', 'tsunami', 'avalanche' and so on – might actually be an understatement," said John Pollock, Coordinator of the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel. "The only reason we haven't already seen two million eviction filings is because of all the CARES Act relief that at this point is either going or gone."

Locally, according to a recent study on eviction by the Pittsburgh Foundation, there are some thirteen to fourteen thousand residential eviction cases filed each year in Allegheny County alone. Landlords win an overwhelming 85 percent of these cases. 73 percent of eviction cases are filed for overdue rent alone, as opposed to lease violations or the term of a leasing ending, so in other words, tenants will **not be** evicted if they pay overdue rent and court costs.

Duquesne University Honors NLS Staff Attorney

Neighborhood Legal Services staff attorney Alyssa Pietropaolo was recently honored by Duquesne University with a “Dukes from the Last Decade” recognition for 2020. Due to the pandemic, the award ceremony planned for this past June was postponed and Pietropaolo will accept her honor next year.

“I was humbled by being selected for a “Dukes from the Last Decade” honor,” said Pietropaolo. “My time at DU was so meaningful, both personally and professionally. I know its impact on me has informed the way I approach my job at Neighborhood Legal Services by treating people from all backgrounds with patience, understanding and respect.”

“The Dukes from the Last Decade” recognitions are presented by the Duquesne University Young Alumni Council. Award recipients have demonstrated outstanding professional excellence, commitment and service to their community, and dedication to Duquesne University.



NLS Provides Eviction Facts at Food Drive-Thru in New Castle



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Neighborhood Legal Services New Castle office recently joined volunteers from the N.O.W. (Nourishing Others Well-Being) Project, an outreach project of the Jubilee Ministries International City Church and the Christian Chamber of Commerce of Western PA, to distribute fliers and NLS brochures with important information about the CARES Rent Relief Program and facts regarding eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic. NLS senior staff attorney Sarah Anderson was part of a group of volunteers, including Ben Roethlisberger and his wife Ashley, distributing boxes of food during the drive-thru food giveaway at Shenango High School. “It was really heart-warming to see so many volunteers coming out to help people experiencing food insecurity due to the pandemic. This is a very tight-knit community where people want to help their neighbors, especially during this very tough time,” said Anderson.

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!

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

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