

JUSTICE MATTERS

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NEIGHBORHOOD LEGAL SERVICES

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SUPPORTING RESIDENTS OF ALLEGHENY, BEAVER, BUTLER AND LAWRENCE COUNTIES

Kris Bergstrom: NLS Executive Director New Energy, New Focus



If you have a program idea, comment or suggestion about NLS, please email us.

support@nlsa.us

It's been several months since Kris Bergstrom was appointed Executive Director of Neighborhood Legal Services. In that time, she's had an opportunity to view the organization through a different lens than in her previous position as a staff attorney, and she likes what she sees.

"As a staff attorney who started with NLS shortly before the pandemic began, I saw how hard our senior leadership worked to make sure we had the tools to continue to serve our clients. We didn't just weather the challenges of the pandemic; we increased our services to reach more people in need. Now that we're beginning to come out the other end of Covid-19, we have an unprecedented opportunity to refresh, renew and reinvigorate our organization and mission moving forward," said Bergstrom.

As Executive Director, Bergstrom has identified several areas she wants to focus

on including creating stronger community partnerships, strengthening pro bono opportunities, using technology to expand the scope of services, creating broader visibility of NLS and the support for legal aid, and a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Before coming to Neighborhood Legal Services, Bergstrom worked with legal aid programs in New Hampshire and Nevada. "I've devoted my professional life to legal aid. I firmly believe that free civil legal aid is the only way to ensure access to justice for everybody. For many people, our services are the difference between shelter and homelessness, between safety and danger, and between stability and poverty," said Bergstrom. "Legal protections mean nothing for low-income people, unless they have the means to enforce those protections. That's what legal aid does. We are a voice for the voiceless."

Judy Hale: Pro Bono Managing Attorney for Housing Initiatives

"If you don't have a secure place to live, everything is harder. It's difficult, or impossible, to deal with any other challenges life throws at you" said Judy Hale, newly appointed Pro Bono Managing Attorney for NLS.

Prior to being named Pro Bono Managing Attorney, Judy was a staff attorney at NLS, joining the organization in 2021. She is one of only a handful of current staff who have worked in all four counties,

Story continued on inside

Judy Hale: New Pro Bono Managing Attorney

(continued)



Beaver, Butler, Lawrence, and Allegheny, where NLS provides legal aid services. Before coming to NLS, Judy was the Legal Advocacy Manager for the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, served as a judicial law clerk for the Senior Judges in Washington County, Pennsylvania, and worked in private practice. She has also worked on developing new programs and initiatives.

Hale's appointment ushers in a new focus on pro bono housing assistance for NLS, as the organization looks to build on its existing pro bono housing services which include helping clients with issues such as eviction, security deposit recovery, tangled titles, overdue or burdensome utility bills, and housing rights for survivors of domestic abuse, among others.

One example of how NLS is building its pro bono housing services is Project Shape.

Project Shape, which stands for Stabilizing Housing and Preventing Eviction through Community Partnerships & Expanded Pro Bono, is a two-year program eviction prevention pro bono effort funded by the Legal Services Corporation's Pro Bono Innovation Fund. This innovative pro bono initiative will help NLS expand delivery of housing advocacy and eviction prevention services by improving intake, recruitment, and case referral, as well as training materials and practice aids.

"Efforts like Project Shape enable us to provide services that can keep clients in their homes. We're working to strengthen our pro bono infrastructure so that we can work more efficiently and create better systems to support attorney volunteers. We see this kind of initiative as an important blueprint for building and strengthening our other areas of pro bono services," said Hale.

NLS Joins Efforts to Strengthen Diversity and Equity

Expanding diversity, inclusion and equity in the legal profession is a critical need and a proactive and ongoing process. NLS has joined new, important partnerships to work toward increasing inclusivity, creating equitable workplaces, and empowering historically marginalized and underrepresented members of the bar.

NLS has been accepted as part of the first cohort in the [Allegheny County Bar Association's ALLY Program](#). ALLY, which stands for "Attorneys, Learning as allies, Living as allies, and Yielding results," is aimed at better reflecting communities served through active participation in various key programs and projects targeted to achieve these objectives. In addition to ALLY, NLS is also a member of the [Pittsburgh Legal Diversity and Equity Coalition](#). The coalition includes members of prominent Pittsburgh law firms and law departments. NLS understands that racial equity

must be centered in our work to promote excellence in the delivery of legal services to those who cannot afford counsel.

"Increasing opportunities in the legal profession is not just important to our mission as an organization but is the right thing to do as a society. NLS has recommitted itself to recruiting diverse staff and promoting their inclusion and advancement," said Kris Bergstrom, Executive Director of NLS.



NLS Helps Former Property Manager Keep His Home



For 30 years, Steve* helped make sure other people who lived in rental properties were taken care of. He handled all types of maintenance issues for landlords, from fixing leaky faucets and stopped-up toilets to replacing broken windows and appliances. But when he needed help himself, his landlord turned on him.

Like many people early in the pandemic, Steve's work hours were cut – so much so that he eventually couldn't afford to pay rent on the lot where he lived in his mobile home. Rather than discussing the situation with Steve, though (or even trying to evict him), the landlord did something much more insidious.

He shut off Steve's access to water.

Thanks to his background, Steve knew the action fell under the definition of "constructive eviction," the illegal interference by a landlord with a tenant's use and enjoyment of the premises they rent.

NLS attorney Stacy Slater got the water turned on again. That's when the landlord served Steve with a formal eviction notice.

So, he called NLS again. This time, attorney Cynthia Gilkey helped him complete a Centers for Disease Control Eviction Protection Declaration, which should have kept him safe during the pandemic. Unfathomably, the district court ruled in favor of the landlord. The eviction would stand.

No way was Gilkey going to let that go unanswered. She challenged the ruling based on a legal error ... and the landlord decided to stop pursuing the eviction – but he didn't stop pursuing Steve. Once the case was closed, the landlord attempted to charge him for money his tenant did not legally owe.

NLS stopped the landlord for a third time by submitting all necessary court documents on Steve's behalf.

"I was glad NLS was there. They were right on top of everything," Steve said. "I couldn't afford to move to a new lot. Because of them, I didn't have to."

**Names have been changed to protect client's safety and privacy.*



April 8 CLE

12:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Criminal Record

Clearing/Expungement CLE

This CLE program will cover expungement/sealing law and procedure as well as how to analyze criminal docket sheets and prepare an expungement petition. After this presentation, attorneys will be given the opportunity to take a pro bono expungement case through the Pittsburgh Pro Bono Partnership in conjunction with Neighborhood Legal Services.

2 Substantive Credits — Presenter: Kathryn Kenyon, Esq.

For more information, contact Julia Marasco at MarascoJ@nlsa.us or (412) 586-6140 or nlsa.salsalabs.org/criminalrecordclearing

Pennsylvania Homeowner Assistance Fund COVID-19 Housing Relief is Now Available

NLS continues to be on the forefront of helping homeowners facing hardships stay in their homes. The organization is now supporting the Pennsylvania Homeowner Assistance Fund, or PAHAF. PAHAF is a housing-related program funded by the U.S. Department of the Treasury to assist Pennsylvania homeowners facing financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic stay in their homes.

PAHAF will provide financial assistance to homeowners for qualified mortgage and housing-related expenses to avoid delinquency, default, foreclosure, or displacement. PAHAF help is provided as a grant, so it does not have to be paid back, and is not a lien on a property.

Currently, NLS offers its clients a variety of housing help, whether they own a home, live in a mobile home, rent a house or apartment, or live in an RV. NLS clients reach out to the organization for help with eviction security deposit recovery, tangled title issues, overdue or burdensome utility bills and housing rights of survivors of domestic abuse, among other issues.

“ The pandemic had, and continues to have, a devastating impact on many of our clients’ abilities to stay in their homes. We’re happy to be able to help our clients access PAHAF help and not have the threat of losing their homes looming over them.” said Catherine Martin, Director of Advocacy attorney with NLS.



NLS works to preserve housing for families facing foreclosure, to apply for legal assistance or obtain help with your PAHAF application, please visit: nlsa.us/request-legal-help or call 866-761-6572.

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!

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

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[www.NLSA.us](https://www.nlsa.us)