

2020 LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY
**Campaign
for Justice**

Closing the Justice Gap . . . Lawyers Must Lead the Way



*“Real change,
enduring change,
happens one step at a time.”*

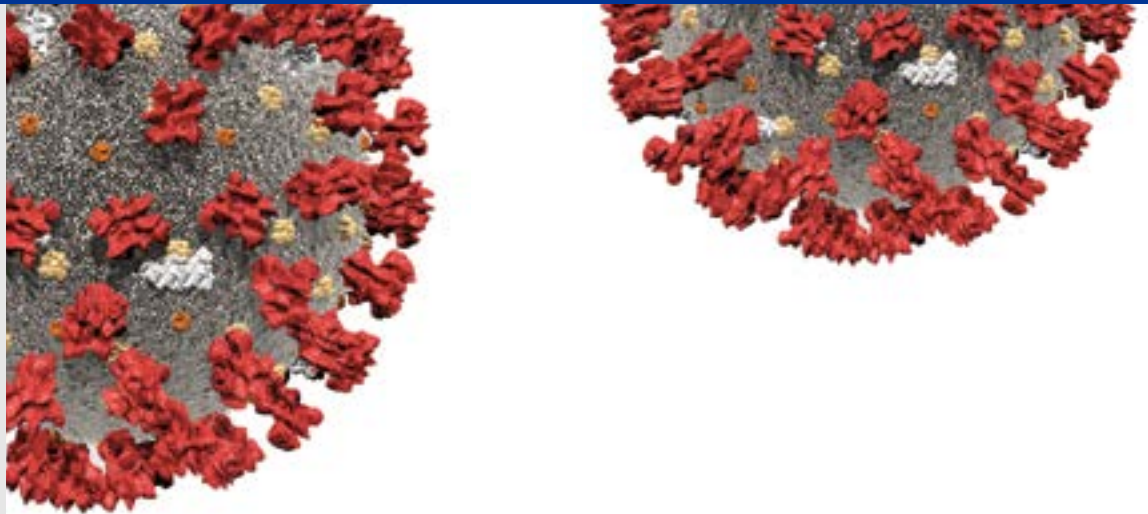
Ruth Bader Ginsberg
Associate Justice
Supreme Court of the United States
1993-2020

Legal Services Remains Steadfast and Resolute

Nearly **3 million people lived in true poverty** in New Jersey in 2019, struggling to pay for basic needs, such as housing, health care, and food.

On average, one-third of this segment of the population will experience **at least one civil legal problem this year**, for which they will need a lawyer. Yet, there is no right to counsel in civil cases as there is in criminal court.

In the overwhelming majority of these civil legal problems—**94 percent**—the side without adequate financial resources will face their adversary **without legal advice or counsel**.



In the midst of the uncertainty and upheaval of the past year, Legal Services has remained steadfast and resolute in its commitment to its core mission—securing equal justice for those living in poverty.

Over the past five decades and across all 21 New Jersey counties, Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) and the regional Legal Services programs have handled 2.6 million cases, helping over 9 million people, and assisting many more through our publications, website, and video resources. In addition to individual casework, we continue to strive toward the shared goal of addressing the systematic and pervasive inequities confronting the most disadvantaged members of our communities.

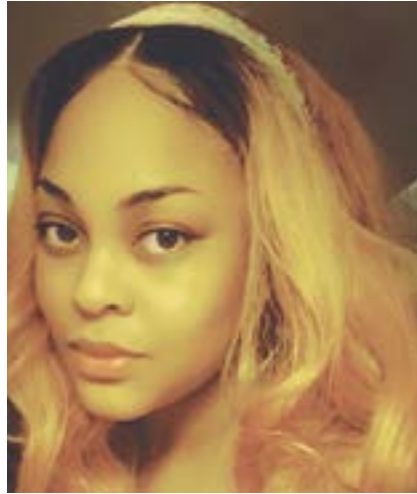
When confronted with the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, our statewide staff demonstrated resiliency and ingenuity, finding new ways to reach people in need through the use of technology and social media. Now, as COVID-19 continues to compound and exacerbate the problems faced by low-income individuals and families in New Jersey, our work is more important than ever. Legal Services staff will continue to tackle injustice in all its forms and serve our clients with zealous dedication and compassion. We need your help.

Join the 2020 Campaign for Justice.

Former Foster Care Youth Speak Out



Titus. “I would like the system to understand what they put children through when they separate them from their families.”



Indira. “CPS should be better with communication and offering help to parents who show potential and love their children.”



Diana. “At times, I wished I had someone I could relate to, someone who knows what it’s like and how hard it is. I want to be that person for children like me.”



Terrell. “I want people to know that a mistake is not a life sentence and that my mom should never have been discounted. I am so lucky to be reunified with her.”

The Reunified Youth Foster Project

was introduced in the spring of 2020 to amplify the voices of those most impacted by the child welfare system—the children. These young adults, all former foster care youth who were later returned to their parents, were empowered to share their stories in order to advocate for the needs of youth in foster care.

When in-person visitation between parents and children in child welfare cases was suspended from March to July, due to the pandemic, they submitted recorded comments stressing the importance of visitation during this time. **Their comments and their individual stories can be found on our website at www.lsnj.org/PovertyChildWelfare.aspx.**

Donate Now.

Former Client Becomes Mentor and Successful Business Owner



*“You know when you see that question—
Have you ever been convicted of a felony?
—you just want to say ‘no,’ because you know once you put ‘yes,’ it’s over.”*

Cane’s upbringing was “a little bit different than most.” When his single mom hooked up with a flashy drug dealer, 12-year-old Cane was recruited into the business, helping to transport cocaine from New York City retail shops to his home in New Jersey. At 22, he was arrested for selling crack cocaine and possession of an illegal weapon and sentenced to three years in prison. Upon his release at age 25, Cane was ready to start a new chapter, but faced one barrier after another trying to reintegrate. His family was denied housing because of his felony. No one would give him a job. Even the community college denied him access to campus.

“Having a label of a felon trying to get a job—it’s just like close to impossible. You know, when you see that question—Have you ever been convicted of a felony?—you just want to say ‘no,’ because you know once you put ‘yes,’ it’s over.”

When it became clear that no one was going to hire him, Cane used the entrepreneurial spirit he had honed in his youth and decided to “boss up.” He took the risky step of starting his own business—first a food truck; then a photography company—and it paid off. Within a few years, he

was a successful business owner and respected community volunteer. What he was not able to do was coach the middle school girls basketball team. They would ask him repeatedly and he would say, “I wish I could. I wish I could,” not wanting to divulge the record that prevented him from doing so.

Cane reached out to Legal Services for help with expungement after his own efforts were unsuccessful. The support for his application was overwhelming—from friends and family, the local chamber of commerce, clergy members, even sheriffs. It took more than six months, but once Cane’s record was expunged, he was finally able to coach. He was also able to increase his mentoring efforts with both youth and inmates. “I don’t want them to have a number for a name,” he says of the young people. Through his work in the prison, he tries to help them find their way and “give them hope.” “People make mistakes all the time,” says Cane. “The difference is some get caught and some don’t.”

“Shout out to the Legal Services of New Jersey,” says Cane. “They put their foot on the pedal and I couldn’t be more grateful for everything that they’ve done for me.”

Disabled Veteran Receives Help From a Team of Lawyers

Vincent is a 55-year-old veteran of the U.S. Air Force who has worked on and off at a furniture store for about \$10 an hour. He suffers from a range of health problems, including lung cancer and pulmonary disease that began years ago and resulted in extended hospitalizations, periods of unemployment, and failure to file taxes.

For two of the years in question, the IRS made a “substitute for return” assessment, essentially filing a return on his behalf—a step the IRS has the authority to do when they believe they have enough information to complete a return. The other years simply went unfiled. In August 2017, Vincent received a notice that he owed close to \$15,000.

He contacted a private attorney, but was turned away and advised to search online for a free resource. He learned about Legal Services from the website and called right away. He says, “It was unbelievable that a poor person could get that kind of help ... It was just a phone call that I made five years ago and it changed my life forever.”

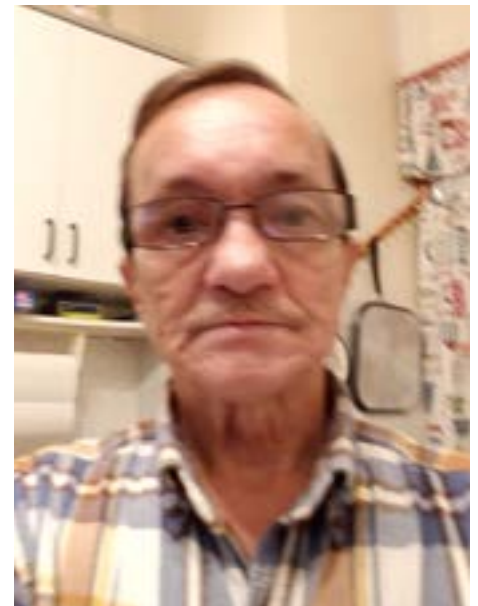
The Tax Legal Assistance Project helped Vincent file five years of tax returns, which resulted in a total tax liability, including fees, of approximately \$40,000. Since he

had no means with which to pay that bill, Legal Services submitted an “offer in compromise” on his behalf. After seven months, his offer was accepted and the bulk of the debt was forgiven.

The entire process took nearly five years. Vincent remembers the attorney warning him in his first phone call with her—that these cases can take a very long time and that he would need to be patient. He credits the whole team with helping him get through the ordeal. “[Paralegal] Valerio kept in touch with me every single month for four years. What a terrific young man. God bless their souls.” Other advocates and social workers helped as well.

During those five years, Vincent’s health continued to deteriorate. He applied for Social Security Disability benefits on his own and was denied. Legal Services’ SSI Project again stepped in to represent him on appeal. His claim was approved in about six months and paid retroactively. A social worker on staff assisted with applications for food stamps and Section 8 housing. Without this holistic support, says Vincent, “I would have been living underneath a bridge somewhere.”

“They’re saints. They’re angels. You have people that are behind you 100%.”



“It was unbelievable that a poor person could get that kind of help ... It was just a phone call that I made five years ago and it changed my life forever.”

The Need Is Great

RACIAL DISPARITIES PERSIST

Nearly half of New Jersey's Black population (47.4%) and more than half of New Jersey's Hispanic population (52.1%) live in true poverty.

The need for civil legal assistance in New Jersey is great, and it is critical that our legal responses and solutions are shaped by accurate and relevant data about poverty. It is for this reason that LSNJ created New Jersey's first and only entity exclusively focused on developing and updating information on poverty in the state more than 20 years ago. LSNJ's Poverty Research Institute (PRI) has been assembling data since 1997 in order to pinpoint the location, demographics, and other aspects of poverty, to enable us to fashion effective and efficient legal responses, and to support public policy decisions. Below are some key statistics for the year 2019. For more information, visit www.lsnj.org/PRI.aspx.

In 2019, 31.9% or 2.8 million New Jerseyans experienced true poverty

Health and Housing

- 48% or 434,617 individuals with a disability live in true poverty.
- 14.6% of individuals in true poverty did not have health insurance.
- 53.6% of all renter households lived below true poverty.

Family, Youth, and Education

- 773,903 children or 40.5% lived in true poverty in 2019. Single female-headed households with children had the highest true poverty rate among all household compositions, with nearly 70% of such households with children living in true poverty.
- Persons with lower educational attainment had higher true poverty rates, 38.9% for individuals without a high school degree compared to 13.2% for those with a Bachelor's degree or higher.

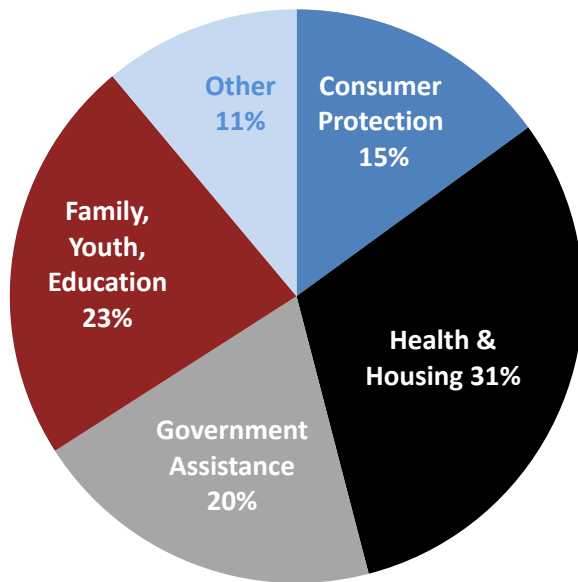
COVID-19 has escalated hardships for many New Jerseyans

- 64.9% of Black and 39% of Hispanic households were not confident of their ability to pay next month's rent.
- 19% of Black and 20% of Hispanic households report food insecurity.
- Lower-income New Jerseyans are more likely to report job loss as a result of COVID-19, with 66% of those earning less than \$25,000 reporting a job loss.

*All 2019 data is from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey.
Data specific to COVID-19 is from the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey.*

Legal Services Responds

2019 Annual Legal Services Cases by Type



Health and Housing – Medicare, Medicaid, Affordable Care Act, access to critical care, foreclosure, eviction, unsafe housing conditions, rental assistance

Family, Youth, and Education – Preserving families, domestic violence, custody, divorce, special education, school discipline, rights of homeless students

Government Assistance – Cash, emergency and other direct assistance, Social Security and other disability benefits, and other aid to special populations

Consumer Protection – Enforcement of consumer protection rights, bankruptcy

Other – Wage claims, unemployment, workers' compensation, safe working conditions, enforcement of other worker protections, tax assistance, reentry and expungement, and protection of other vulnerable populations such as veterans, the elderly, and those with special needs

"I was too weak to fight for justice, but they continued to fight when I couldn't."

Client of Northeast
New Jersey
Legal Services

**Join the 2020 Campaign for Justice.
Donate Now.**

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The annual Campaign for Justice raises funds for Legal Services of New Jersey and its five regional programs, which provide direct services to clients in all 21 counties through 22 offices. Your tax-deductible contribution will help us accept more cases and provide the legal expertise and the access to justice our clients deserve. Please donate by visiting the Campaign for Justice website at www.lsnj.org/cfj.



Statewide Program

Legal Services of New Jersey

Regional Programs

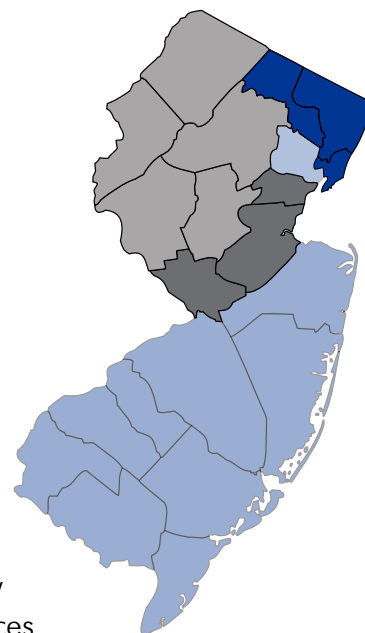
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“If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: Thou shalt not ration justice.”

Judge Learned Hand