

Legal Services Increases Efforts to Prevent Evictions During COVID-19



Thousands of New Jersey residents lost their jobs or were furloughed during the height of the pandemic, and many spent down their savings while waiting for their stimulus and unemployment benefits to arrive—putting those with limited savings at risk of eviction. Through outreach, educational materials, and individual representation, Legal Services programs across the state immediately stepped up efforts to protect those most vulnerable.

Despite federal and state moratoriums on evictions, many tenants were unaware of their rights and some landlords have been quick to take advantage. “In some areas,” says Jose Ortiz of Essex-Newark Legal Services, “tenants

from the landlord.”

In other areas of the state, motel owners attempted to force out long-term residents in favor of higher paying summer tourists, despite the risk of COVID-19 infection and the moratorium on evictions. South Jersey Legal Services successfully represented families in several shore towns to ensure that they did not end up on the streets during this time.

In yet another part of the state, Mercer County became the first county to initiate remote settlement conferences with landlords and tenants in nonpayment of rent cases. Central Jersey Legal Services’ Trenton office immediately went to work advocating for the rights of tenants throughout this

process, working with the courts to ensure that tenants are informed of the voluntary nature of these conferences, and given contact information for Legal Services as well as other resources for help. The judge has since created a Power Point presentation to inform all parties of their rights, and now allows a Legal Services staff person the opportunity to say a few words. According to Susan Knispel of Central Jersey Legal Services, most clients do not have the means to commit to a settlement agreement, so there is little point in attending one. Yet, early in the process, tenants were being pushed into Zoom breakout sessions with just the landlord’s attorney. Now, due to advocacy efforts from several groups, including CJLS, there is a court-appointed mediator in each session and tenants are made aware that they are under no obligation to settle. Knispel says,

believe that certain notices are from the courts—believing that they have to leave—when it’s not from the courts, it’s

“I think we’ve been really instrumental in making this procedure more fair.”

We Remain Steadfast and Resolute



2020 has been a year unlike any other: unpredictable and tumultuous, bringing changes in its wake, the full effects of which are unfolding daily. We have witnessed not only the brutal reality of the racism that exists in our society, but also the devastating impact of economic disparity in the face of a worldwide pandemic.

The killing of George Floyd in May 2020 exposed pervasive inequality and racial disparities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and jeopardize the lives of too many: higher fatality rates and increased exposure to COVID-19 for people of color, whether in our prisons and jails, or as front-line workers; higher rates of unemployment; and greater vulnerability to eviction. As lawyers we know that potential protection and relief for many of these issues have a basis in the law, rendering access to legal representation even more critical now.

Amidst all the uncertainties and upheaval of the past seven months, what remains steadfast and resolute is Legal Services' statewide commitment to its core mission of 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 assisted many more, with the shared goal of addressing the systematic and pervasive inequities that confront the most disadvantaged members of our communities. 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. As the new president of LSNJ, I join them in my commitment to doing the same, as we face together the challenges and opportunities the future surely will bring.

- Dawn K. Miller

SAY THEIR NAMES

Statement of Legal Services of New Jersey Concerning Government and Vigilante Perpetrated Violence Against People of Color

LSNJ, the coordinating agency for the state's Legal Services system, on behalf of that system, condemns in the strongest possible terms the murders of people of color, and the thousands upon thousands, and from a multi-century perspective millions upon millions, of those who are black, brown, and every other hue of skin or personal characteristic that leads to people being targeted as "other."

As an organization we will reject and resist those voices that encourage, or condone, or apologize for, or seek to legitimize such activity. And we urge all New Jersey residents to observe, bear witness, and demand that such discrimination and violence end now, finally and forever.

Visit our website, www.lsnj.org, for the full statement released in June 2020.

Senior Gets Help Fending Off Foreclosure

John is 84 years old. He worked sporadic part-time jobs later in life, including substitute teaching, until an injury forced him to stop working completely. John and his wife, Grace, now live on a Social Security income of approximately \$25,000 a year.

The couple took out a reverse mortgage about seven years prior to their first call to Legal Services, and had fallen behind on their property tax payments. Threatened with foreclosure, John says, “I needed a lawyer. I definitely needed a lawyer.” He tried to secure a private attorney, but with limited funds, “it was just impossible.”

John first contacted Legal Services in 2018 and has received help from many staff members in the Foreclosure Defense Project on a variety of issues related to saving his home from foreclosure. In particular, he recalls the first call with his attorney, saying:

“He was the one who finally came to a good conclusion. I felt that something good would happen with me after I spoke with him.”



Legal Services helped John obtain an At-Risk Extension, a special program for reverse mortgage borrowers over 80 with health problems. As this program is currently renewable each year, advocates again helped John in 2020, thereby protecting John and Grace from the possibility of losing their housing during this difficult and scary time.

Unemployment Benefits are Critical in Keeping Young Families Afloat



Aaliyah, 32, shares a room in a Trenton basement with her 2-year-old daughter. She worked as a cook and a home health aide

before COVID-19, but lost both jobs, due to the pandemic. She fell behind on utility and other bills while her unemployment claim got stuck in “pending” status for months. Eventually, she called Legal Services for help.

Through a holistic approach involving multiple advocates, Legal Services not only helped Aaliyah with her unemployment benefits, but also helped her apply for the Children’s Health Insurance

Program for her daughter, and apply for subsidized housing in the hopes of finding a better place to live.

In addition to helping

people like Aaliyah with their unemployment claims, LSNJ’s Sarah Hymowitz offered a webinar on YouTube to educate the public about the application process and their rights within it. The webinar has been viewed more than 7,000 times to date. Check it out at: www.YOUTUBE.com/watch?v=QJPPbdOp9Q.



Ramona Romero

Ramona E. Romero, who recently joined the board of trustees for Legal Services of New Jersey, has served as vice president and general counsel at Princeton University since 2014. Prior to that, Romero was general counsel of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a role to which she was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in 2010. Before joining the Obama Administration, she worked at DuPont in a variety of legal roles, after a career as a litigator in Washington, D.C.

Romero says, “If you look at the arc of my career, there has always been a component of community and legal services.” Her commitment to equal justice was generated by the experiences of her childhood where she often served as a translator for those involved with the government. While at Harvard Law School, she helped incarcerated people at parole and disciplinary hearings. And from the beginning of her career, Romero has provided pro bono counsel: “Providing pro bono services to people directly has been an important part of my work in private practice, while also focusing on more macro social

services issues.” One area of particular interest for Romero has been the judiciary. She served on a task force led by Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and was very involved with The Justice at Stake Campaign, whose mission was to help “keep courts fair and impartial.”

Romero has been a volunteer leader in many professional and community organizations. In addition to the LSNJ Board of Trustees, she currently serves on the board of trustees of the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton. Her prior volunteer service includes the boards of The Justice at Stake Campaign, the American Red Cross of the Delmarva Peninsula, and the American Constitution Society for Law and Policy, as well as the advisory committee of The O’Connor Judicial Selection Initiative at the University of Denver. She is a former national president of the Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA), where she founded the Latina Commission and the highly successful Hispanic Appointments Project.

Romero, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, holds a B.A. from Barnard College and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. She, her husband, and their two daughters live in Princeton.

Special Thanks to Our PROBONONJ Partners

Visit www.probononj.org to register



Suzanne E. McSorley Stevens & Lee

Princeton attorney Suzanne E. McSorley has been a partner and supporter of LSNJ for over 25 years, coordinating Princeton University's Partnerships in Civic Service (PICS)—a program that funds internships for students to work at LSNJ—and regularly accepting pro bono referrals. Included here is an excerpt from a thank you note from one of Ms. McSorley's clients, whom she assisted for several years with housing and other legal issues resulting from Superstorm Sandy.

We have been extremely fortunate and blessed to be represented by such a high caliber and caring professional as Ms. McSorley has demonstrated to be through these years; from the beginning of her representation Ms. McSorley worked incessantly and diligently to ensure the best possible outcome on my family's behalf and remained that way throughout the entire lengthy and extremely challenging legal process.

Thank you immensely for your time, your kindness and for your vote of confidence. We will be eternally indebted for all the help extended to us in a time of need and for giving me a new lease on life. You and LSNJ are our family and will forever be in our hearts.

Ade Oremuso, Verizon

Ade Oremuso, senior managing associate general counsel at Verizon, successfully expunged the criminal record of an LSNJ client. Mr. Oremuso was able to help the client expunge a disorderly persons conviction and another separate

arrest, effectively clearing the client's entire history of arrests. Notably, the conviction had previously been statutorily barred from expungement, but clearing that conviction was made possible after a recent change in the law. Mr. Oremuso is part of a continuing

pro bono project between Verizon and LSNJ assisting individuals in clearing their criminal records. This cooperative project, developed as part of Verizon's corporate-wide pro bono criminal justice initiative, also involves several other attorneys from Verizon.

Expungement has long been a tool for those with criminal or juvenile justice involvement to gain fair access to employment opportunities. It is even more important now, as unemployment has risen as a result of COVID-19. Many individuals are returning to a job market that can be unforgiving to those with previous arrest or conviction records. For many, expungement is a pathway to economic security and justice.

"There is a great need for direct legal representation for those in poverty," says Akil Roper, senior vice president and chief counsel for reentry. "Since we do not have the resources to represent every client that comes to our doors seeking assistance for an expungement, the help we get from our pro bono partners is vitally important."

LSNJ Releases Updated Legal Rights Handbooks for Pro Se Litigants

LSNJ has recently updated a number of legal rights handbooks to ensure that *pro se* litigants are accessing the most current information. All of these handbooks are available in English and Spanish on our website, www.lsnjlaw.org / www.lsnjlaw.org/sp. Some are available in other languages as well. Our website is viewed tens of thousands of times per month, and these resources are invaluable to people in search of answers to their civil legal problems.

Tenants' Rights in New Jersey (2020): A guide to landlord-tenant law for New Jersey residents. The manual includes chapters on finding a place to live, security deposits, leases, rent increases, the responsibilities of landlords and tenants, legal and illegal evictions, condo and co-op conversions, and the right to safe and decent housing.

Clearing Your Record (2020): Basic information about how to clear—"expunge"—a record of arrest or conviction in New Jersey. It includes the forms needed for filing.

Your Legal Rights to Be Free from Dating Violence and Harassment (2020): Violence or harassment in a current or former romantic relationship is called "dating violence and harassment." This guide helps users identify relationship behavior that crosses the line from an unhealthy relationship to illegal behavior and to know what they can do to protect themselves under the law.

Domestic Violence (2019): Explains the major provisions of New Jersey law about domestic violence and suggests some of the measures victims can take to protect themselves from abuse, including use of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act to get a restraining order to keep the abuser away. It is available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Arabic, and Hindi.

Divorce in New Jersey: A Self-Help Guide (2019): An instructional guide available in digital PDF format at no cost on our website. The forms required for filing a divorce are available for \$25, or free for those who are eligible for our services.



Client Receives Dentures After Waiting More than a Year

Julia first contacted Legal Services in 2019. She was living in a trailer in a rural shore community with very limited income and had been approved for Medicaid, but was in a dispute over the provision of dentures. The Medicaid office insisted that she had received dentures through private insurance she had while working several years prior. In reality, the dental practice had closed before providing her with the dentures paid for by her

insurance. Told she would have to pay \$1,200 out of pocket, which she did not have, Julia went several years without dentures—leaving her confined to her home out of embarrassment, and unable to eat a normal diet. Without the help of Legal Services, Julia says,

“I would still be in the same boat, still fighting, still not getting anywhere.”

After multiple appeals, Julia was finally scheduled for a Zoom hearing during COVID-19. Without the technology needed to be able to participate, she would have been rescheduled yet again—or worse, denied. Due to the persistence of her Legal Services advocate, the insurance company finally agreed to forego the hearing, and approved Julia’s dentures based on the evidence.

New Interactive Program Helps Victims of Crime Apply for Compensation

Experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and other criminal acts can be devastating physically, emotionally, and even financially. The consequences can continue to

impact a victim long after the criminal act has ended. When crimes lead to financial hardships, New Jersey’s Victims of Crime Compensation Office (VCCO) can help crime victims and their

families move away, get treatment (physical, mental, or dental), or attend a funeral of a relative who was killed. The VCCO can even provide direct cash assistance to replace income and support that the offender used to provide.

LSNJ has a new interactive program to help crime victims complete the application for VCCO assistance with step-by-step instructions and information. Check out this important new program—LSNJ’s Interactive Application for Victims of Crime Compensation—at www.lsnjlaw.org/Pages/a2j/VCCO/default.aspx.



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



Look for the upcoming Campaign for Justice announcement and consider a donation to support justice and fairness in New Jersey.

This annual campaign raises funds for Legal Services of New Jersey and its five regional programs, which provide direct services to clients in all 21 counties through 23 local offices.

Your tax-deductible contribution helps us accept more cases and provide the legal expertise and the access to justice our clients deserve. You can donate at any time by visiting the Campaign for Justice website at www.lsnj.org/cfj.



www.LSNJ.org – An organizational website where you can learn about the work of Legal Services.

www.LSNJLAW.org – A legal information website to help you learn more about your civil legal rights in New Jersey and access materials to help you represent yourself pro se.

www.PROBONONJ.org – A site where attorneys can learn about and sign up for pro bono opportunities.

www.NJEJLA.org – The New Jersey Equal Justice Library and Archive is an educational resource that includes a history of Legal Services in New Jersey, interviews with current and former staff, and tributes to major contributors to social justice.



POVERTY to JUSTICE

A Quarterly Report from
Legal Services of New Jersey

To be added to the mailing list for this newsletter, email development@lsnj.org.

Check Out Our Newest Client Story at www.lsnj.org/ClientsVideosStories.aspx



OUR CLIENTS SPEAK

Shout out to the Legal Services of New Jersey ... You know, they put their foot on the pedal and I couldn't be more grateful for everything that they've done for me.

Cane was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison after his first and only offense at the age of 22. Upon his release, he struggled to find housing and a job because of his felony record. When it became clear that no one was going to hire him, he took the bold move of starting his own business. It was not until some teens urged him to coach their basketball team that he decided

to try to expunge his record. He wanted to give back to his community and was prevented from doing so because of his record. Legal Services helped Cane with his expungement application, which, once approved, allowed him not only to expand his mentoring efforts with teens, but also to begin visiting inmates in prison, to help “bring them hope.”