

Pro Bono Service in New Jersey Helps Create Equitable Outcomes for People in Need



Legal Services staff at the NJ State Bar Association Pro Bono Awards event on October 22. Left to right: Michelle Nuciglio, SJLS; Sharon Yoo, LSNWJ; Liceny Espaillat, ENLS; Akil Roper, LSNJ; Casey Hakim, ENLS; Aili Monahan, NNJLS; Lauren James-Weir, NNJLS

At the New Jersey State Bar Association's annual conference in Atlantic City this past May, a panel of attorneys and advocates from the NJSBA Pro Bono Committee representing law firm pro bono groups, nonprofit legal services and advocacy organizations described the current need for pro bono services as "unprecedented." While this description may seem alarmist, it rings loudly in truth.

The Justice Gap

According to the Legal Services

Corporation's Justice Gap Report published in 2022, "nationwide, low-income people did not receive any or enough legal help for 92% of their civil legal problems." Legal Services of New Jersey's Poverty Research Institute (PRI), which studies and reports regularly on poverty in New Jersey, yielded a similar result, finding that "in 2022, nearly three-fourths of low-income New Jersey households faced at least one civil legal problem and approximately nine out of 10 of these problems

(87.2 percent) did not receive any or enough legal help."ⁱⁱ Collectively, low-income New Jerseyans did not receive any or enough legal help for nearly 3.4 million problems that negatively impacted their households.ⁱⁱⁱ

Unlike criminal court there is no guaranteed lawyer for most civil legal problems. But the legal problems an individual may face in civil court can be just as critical and life-altering and have devastating results which can

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President's Message



Dawn K. Miller, Esq.
President, Legal Services of New Jersey

The shutdown of the federal government has sweeping and devastating consequences for LSNJ's low-income client community. Although rapidly evolving, at the time of this writing, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has refused to utilize available contingency funds to pay Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits during the shutdown of the federal government. As a result, SNAP benefits have not been issued for the month of November.

In New Jersey, one in nine people rely on SNAP food assistance each month. Without it, they face an immediate and inhumane threat of hunger.

A substantial number of legal

services clients will be affected by this crisis, including seniors, families, individuals receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or General Assistance (GA), and working families—all with very low incomes.

Every day, Legal Services advocates assist low-income New Jerseyans in a wide range of civil legal matters, including securing basic needs such as essential food and cash assistance. Advocates work together across legal areas to address overlapping, cascading issues.

The high cost of housing in New Jersey, for example, means that any unexpected financial setback—including the loss of essential benefits such as SNAP—could easily lead to an eviction filing, quickly threatening not only housing stability but also education and employment.

Without a doubt, the impending loss of SNAP benefits will force our neighbors and fellow New Jerseyans to make difficult decisions that no one should have to choose between—feeding a hungry household, turning the heat on as the nights grow colder, paying for prescription medications, or paying the rent on time.

Civil legal assistance from experienced Legal Services advocates is a powerful and effective

intervention, helping many low-income families avoid crisis, connect with resources, and achieve or maintain stability. Since 1966, Legal Services has assisted nearly 9 million low-income New Jerseyans in nearly 3 million cases and assisted millions more via impact cases, outreach, advocacy, and free self-help resources. Unfortunately, the need for our services remains dire, with more than 3.1 million New Jerseyans living in True Poverty, or below the minimum income needed to afford basic necessities without sacrificing other basic needs.

Recent cuts to Legal Services' funding sources and continuing cuts to social safety net programs will further harm vulnerable New Jerseyans and risk widening the civil legal assistance gap. While we remain steadfast in our mission, we seek your ongoing support. Whether you are able to lend your expertise to our pro bono program, contribute financially to our 2025 Campaign for Justice, or attend an upcoming event, your continued support is more urgent, impactful, and appreciated than ever. Thank you in advance for joining as we continue to provide direct legal assistance to New Jerseyans in need and advocate for systemic and transformative change that uplifts the rights, dignity, and well-being of all.

Tanisha—Legal Assistance to Medical Patients Client

Tanisha (not her real name) is a single mom with three children between the ages of seven and 21. She has worked part-time in a doctor's office for nearly 20 years. She suffers from sickle cell anemia, a lifelong illness with no cure, with symptoms including migraines and bleeding behind her eyes. She has had her spleen, pituitary gland, and a cranial tumor removed, and recently suffered a stroke.

When the disability assistance she had received since 2003 was suddenly terminated in 2018, Tanisha didn't know where to turn. SSA had determined that her hospitalizations were not frequent enough to prevent full-time work, despite the advice of her hematologist to work no more than 12 hours a week.

Fortunately, Tanisha's nurse practitioner referred her to LSNJ's Legal Assistance to Medical Patients (LAMP) project. LAMP advocates represented her through three appeals before finally winning the case. "I was tired of fighting, to be honest," she says, adding there were times "I wanted to give up." But her lawyer, Rich, encouraged her to appeal one more time. "Eventually, she

was put on for another hearing," says Rich Routh of the LAMP Project. "This time, after over four years of working on the case, she was finally able to get approved." When she got the favorable notice, Tanisha says, "All I could do was cry and praise the Lord."

After six years of trying to survive on just her part-time income, Tanisha looks forward to catching up on bills and using her retro-active check to purchase a more reliable vehicle.

LSNJ regularly produces videos of clients who have been helped by Legal Services. To watch Tanisha's video, and other "Our Clients Speak" videos, visit www.lsnj.org/Videolibrary.

"I'm very happy for Legal Services. Very thankful for Rich."





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impact an individual’s life and liberty. In landlord tenant court, where roughly 96% of tenants go unrepresented (compared to 10% of unrepresented landlords), far too many families are subject to eviction proceedings, many of which could have been avoided if tenants had been assisted by counsel.^{iv} Many low-income families who are evicted may not get rehoused for long periods of time, and the impact is particularly troubling for families

with young children or special needs. Another common civil legal issue which can deeply impact low-income individuals is the loss of public benefits. For people with disabilities, older adults, and those on limited fixed income this can be devastating—Social Security, disability benefits, and unemployment insurance can otherwise be a vital lifeline for lower income and wage workers.

When access to justice is limited to only those with sufficient means to afford legal representation, the result is further direct harm to individuals and families, financial hardship, housing instability and negative health impacts.

Unresolved legal problems lead many to further rely on public resources and social services. Failure to provide access to representation to the state’s most in need also erodes the confidence and public trust in the legal system and further perpetuates disenfranchisement.

Civil Legal Needs are Pro Bono Opportunities

Legal Services provides pro bono volunteers the opportunity to use their

knowledge and skills in a variety of areas of law. Some volunteers help clients file for bankruptcy to help them rebuild financially; others for expungement, to help secure better employment prospects; others with wills, estates, guardianship, or name changes. LSNJ’s Domestic Violence unit regularly assists victims of domestic violence seeking orders of protection against their abusers and actively recruits and trains pro bono volunteers to help provide more assistance to individuals in need. LSNJ also recently partnered with a private law firm and another legal services organization to pair children with special education needs with teams of lawyers ready to help guide families through the IEP process.

Attorneys report a variety of reasons they become involved with pro bono. “I can’t fix all the problems in this country that are mind boggling today,” said one pro bono volunteer, “but at least I can do a little something and maybe just move the pendulum a teeny tiny bit towards justice for all.”

Sometimes, pro bono assistance is provided outside the courthouse. Many pro bono case opportunities do not require a court appearance but can nonetheless be very impactful.

In one recent example of a client in need, a pro bono volunteer helped the client prepare a will, power of attorney, and a health care proxy.

In another matter, one of our pro bono volunteers assisted an 84-year-old client with an estate issue. The client lived in a house owned by her mother who died in 2017. She was seeking to transfer the title to her name to qualify for financing and protect the house from property tax foreclosure. The pro bono volunteer met with the client and drafted conveyance documents to assist with the title transfer and notified family members with potential interest in the property. The pro bono attorney also provided additional advice regarding the estate and other potential issues after the matter had been concluded. Ultimately, the client was able to qualify for necessary assistance to save the property from tax sale.

Low-income clients need pro bono volunteer attorneys who will assist them through an unfamiliar and complicated legal process. Usually, this means knowledgeable and experienced attorneys and advocates offering direct representation. While clinics and bundled services such as one-time advice and brief services help, clients often return because they need additional assistance with their legal problems. When possible, the most effective assistance model is a lawyer prepared to help a client navigate a multistep legal process.

Legal Services and nonprofits will partner with firms, organizations, and individuals to increase the chances of someone getting help through the resolution of their case.

One Legal Services pro bono volunteer said, "I highly recommend that young attorneys look into pro bono work because it's valuable to sharpen their skills in all areas of the law, but also it can go a long way for a lot of people that are in need."

LSNJ offers training, mentorship, and other supports to pro bono volunteers in the areas of law most critical to our low-income clients. Law firms have responded to the call by setting up projects designed to help clients with specific legal issues of importance such as bankruptcy, expungement and pardons, name changes, and guardianships.

In the words of our New Jersey

Supreme Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner, "[p]ro bono work is in keeping with the noblest traditions of the legal profession. Pro bono work is not just a helpful supplement to the legal system, it's vital to the delivery of justice in our state and in our nation."

Adapted from an article published in the New Jersey State Bar Association's October 2025 issue of New Jersey Lawyer.

Endnotes

i Legal Services Corporation. 2022. The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans. Prepared by Mary C. Slosar, Slosar Research, LLC.

ii These estimates are detailed in LSNJ's Poverty Research Institute's upcoming report on the Justice Gap in New Jersey, due to be published soon.

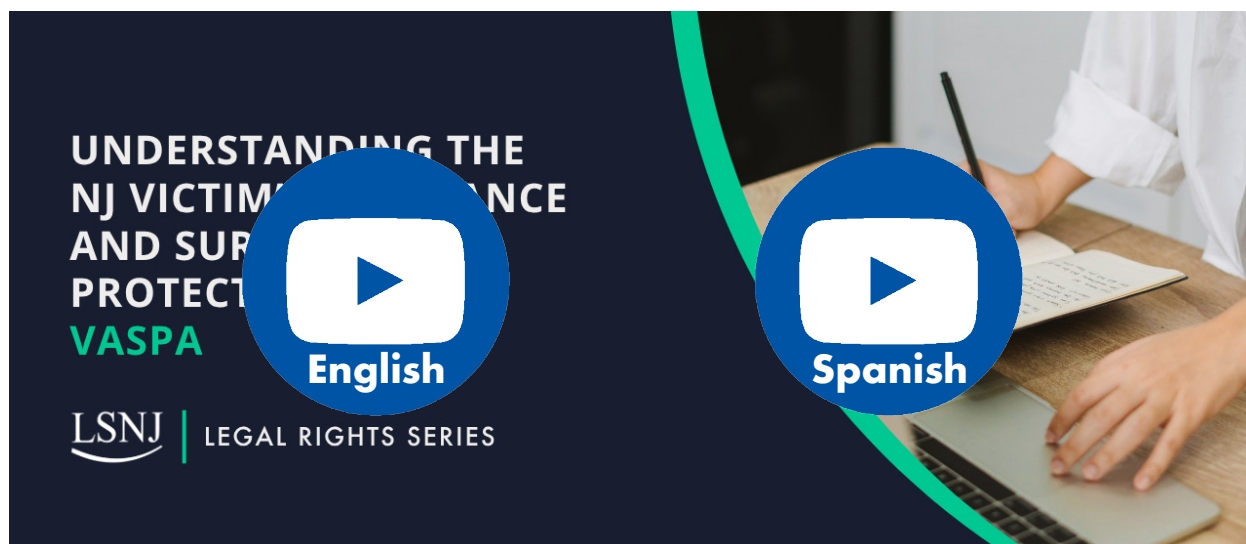
iii These estimates are detailed in LSNJ's Poverty Research Institute's upcoming report on the Justice Gap in New Jersey, due to be published soon.

iv Legal Services of New Jersey. True Poverty: What it Takes to Avoid Poverty and Deprivation in the Garden State. July 2021



Congratulations to LSNJ Senior Vice President Akil Roper on receiving the Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights and Social Justice Award by the NAACP Metuchen-Edison Branch at their Annual Freedom Fund Gala. Marshall was a civil rights lawyer who used the courts to fight Jim Crow and dismantle segregation. He was the nation's first Black United States Supreme Court Justice and is best known for arguing the historic 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case, in which the Supreme Court declared "separate but equal" unconstitutional in public schools. Roper has been with LSNJ for 17 years and, among many other valued roles, oversees advocacy on Reentry, Pro Bono, and Racial and Ethnic Justice Initiatives.

NEW RELEASE
VASPA Legal Rights Video Series



SAVE THE DATE!

Melville D. ("De") Miller, Jr. Justice Series Webinar

Reproductive Rights and Health in New Jersey

December 15, 2025

12 – 1:30 p.m.

The next Justice Series webinar will address recent developments in the law impacting reproductive rights, policy advocacy, and health implications.

Confirmed presenters include:

Aarin Williams, Chief Advisor to the Director, New Jersey Division on Civil Rights

Jeanne LoCicero, Legal Director, ACLU-NJ

Jasmine Winters, Coordinator at Cherry Hill Women's Center

The Melville "De" Miller, Jr. Justice Series, named in honor of LSNJ's co-founder and former president, is open to the public and intended to raise awareness of important social, legal, and economic justice issues. These free events feature guest lecturers and members of the community who speak on topics of appeal to both lawyers and non-lawyers. Continuing credits are offered for lawyers.

Visit www.lsnj.org/JusticeSeries to learn about past and upcoming webinars.

For information on sponsoring an upcoming Justice Series event, email development@lsnj.org.

Advocates with LSNJ's Reentry Project Educate Local Students on Expungement Process

Outreach activities are one of the best ways to educate community members, students, and pro bono volunteers on topics that impact our client population. At this most recent event, Elizabeth Jimenez and Rob Dennerlein visited Berkeley College in Woodbridge to provide an overview of the expungement process in New Jersey to students interested in pursuing a career in criminal justice. We thank the college for giving us the opportunity to help educate students.



Elizabeth Jimenez of LSNJ's Reentry Project presents to students at Berkeley College in Woodbridge.



2025 LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY Campaign
for Justice
for **All**
has launched!

Keep an eye out for our new brochure and information about how to donate to the 2025 Campaign. Visit www.lsnj.org/cfj to learn more.



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

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.

Poverty to Justice quarterly newsletter includes updates on our work, our clients, and our volunteers as we move together toward the shared mission of justice.



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Cy pres awards from class action settlements provide significant support for our work. Checks should be made payable to **"Legal Services of New Jersey."** For more information, email eshulman@lsnj.org.

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