

Legal Services in the Time of COVID-19

As the world around us has changed dramatically because of COVID-19, the New Jersey Legal Services system has remained open for business and focused on our mission—to secure equal substantive and procedural justice for all economically disadvantaged people in New Jersey.

Legal Services accepts approximately 50,000 new cases annually. Because of early actions taken by Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) to provide a statewide remote system, that representation continues. In just seven working days, beginning the second week of March, we successfully linked all 21 of our offices and clients and retained all of our staff, nearly 500 strong in total across the state. Our three statewide

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Christine and her husband purchased their Atlantic County home in 2001, “back in the glory days, before the recession ... when the market was very, very, good.” At that time, she says, mortgage companies were “pretty much handing us money” to encourage spending on home improvement projects. With the recession of 2008, new construction came to a screeching halt and her husband’s access to union plumber jobs dried

Our Clients Speak

up. At the same time, online competitors forced the closure of the insurance office that had employed Christine for over two decades and, “It got harder and harder to pay the mortgage.” The couple fell behind on their payments and contacted the LSNJ LAWSM hotline when they received a foreclosure notice. While not in a financial position to save their home, Christine and her husband received essential guidance through the process to preserve the rights they did have and protect their personal property interests. She describes the staff of the foreclosure defense project as “very kind, patient people” and says that, even if she had the funds to hire a private attorney, she would hire someone like her attorney Maryann Flanigan. “She guided me every step of the way.”

2020 EJA Reception Postponed

It is with great regret that we must postpone our annual Equal Justice Awards reception, which had been slated for June 2. We are working with the vendor to reschedule at an appropriate time.

legal assistance hotlines remain open, along with our online application for legal assistance, available at www.lsnjlawhotline.org. A comprehensive new section



of our website, www.lsnjlaw.org/coronavirus, provides COVID-19 related resources that are updated regularly as laws and guidelines continue to change rapidly.

LSNJ was well poised to respond to this crisis relying on its extensive experience dealing with past disasters.

■ Our senior lawyers, who are respected statewide experts in their fields, have been monitoring all COVID-19 related law changes and government orders daily and providing essential information and expert analysis throughout the statewide Legal Services network.

■ We are advocating for important improvements in state laws during this active legislative period.

■ We are convening and conduct-

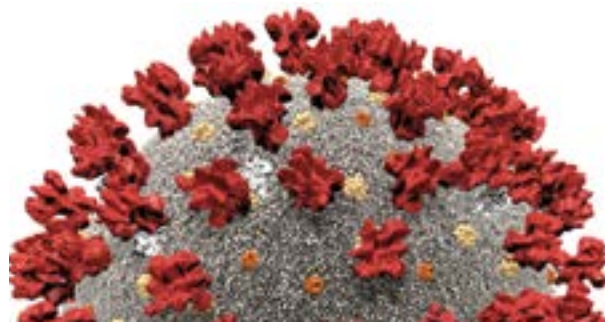
ing statewide trainings and video conferences on critical issues several times weekly through webinars, videos, and live social media presentations.

It is abundantly clear that the coronavirus outbreak in New Jersey, second highest in the country, has created a new mass of low-income individuals. These new poor are in addition to the nearly 3 million low-income New Jersey residents who, pre-COVID-19, were living in poverty in New Jersey and eligible for free legal

assistance from LSNJ. This newly enlarged group of people trapped in true poverty tragically will face a wide range of new legal problems, some that will plague them long term, resulting from the economic collapse triggered by COVID-19. The challenges before us are great and we do not know what precisely lies ahead or when we will be back to our “new normal.” But, even as the state of New Jersey and all of our lives have been so deeply affected by COVID-19, we remain steadfast in our commitment to our clients and to our mission for a legal system that provides equal access to justice for everyone.



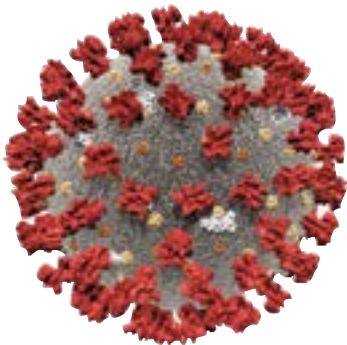
TO MAKE A DONATION, VISIT
www.lsnj.org/CFJ/donate





A Special Thanks to Our Pro Bono Volunteers

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented hardships for low-income people across the state, but it has also impacted the legal community—from solo practitioners to the largest firms. We appreciate the willingness of our current core of institutional pro bono partners and volunteers to continue to provide services to our clients during these difficult times.

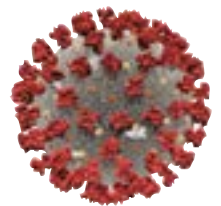


Despite working from home and having access to fewer resources for case handling, pro bono lawyers working with LSNJ continue to seek opportunities in many substantive areas of need, including housing, bankruptcy, and family law and, remarkably, they are actively accepting and working on cases for our clients.

In one recent case, a pro bono volunteer accepted a case to help a senior citizen file for bankruptcy. After the moratorium on foreclosures is over, he will be

facing a sheriff sale of his property. The assistance provided by this volunteer attorney will help the client reorganize his finances and get a fresh start. In another matter, a volunteer attorney through our partnership with Verizon (see story, page 7) accepted a case to file an expungement application for a client so she can reenter the job market with a clean record after the economic crisis.

We are reminded that, despite our own challenges, we must remain steadfast in our mission to provide legal assistance, and help ensure that those with limited means still have meaningful access to the courts—that they are ultimately able to obtain justice.



**TO REGISTER AS A PRO BONO VOLUNTEER,
visit www.probononj.org**

*Even during COVID-19,
our pro bono attorneys are actively accepting
and working on cases for our clients.*



Carlos Bollar

partner at Archer & Greiner, is one of the newest additions to the LSNJ Board of Trustees. The New Jersey native studied political science and English at Rutgers University before earning his law degree from Rutgers School of Law, Camden, in 1997. He clerked for the Honorable William J. Cook in the New Jersey Superior Court, Camden County from 1997-1998.

"I was one of those kids who decided I wanted to be a lawyer very young, before I really knew what a lawyer was—probably because I liked to argue," says Bollar. "I always thought of a lawyer as someone who could help people ... as lawyers, we have the ability to effectuate change and help people ... I always wanted to do that."

His area of practice is environmental law, toxic tort and product liability litigation. Bollar serves on the board of trustees of the New Jersey State Bar Association, is the finance director for the Hispanic National Bar Association and is a past president of the Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey. Diversity and inclusion in the legal profession is a topic of particular

interest to Bollar, who frequently lectures on the topic. He is co-chair of the personnel committee at Archer & Greiner.

As someone who has "walked the path of a person with immigrant parents," one from Cuba, the other from the Dominican Republic, Bollar is keenly aware of the "under-representation of people of color, the LGBTQ community, of women," and notes "the higher up you go in the profession, the less diverse it gets." In a state with such a diverse population, this "leads to a disparity in the provision of justice."

When asked about the LSNJ Board, Bollar explains that Ivette Alvarez, former LSNJ trustee and one of his role models, asked him to join and "it didn't take much convincing ... Throughout my career, I have seen and heard of the reputation of Legal Services of New Jersey. I know and have been aware of the good work—the amazing work—that Legal Services does ... If you practice law in New Jersey for any length of time, you become familiar with the work that they do and the importance of it."

Dara Govan

an assistant U.S. attorney and Plainfield native, is the third member of her family to graduate from Morgan State University. Her father, a professional basketball player, influenced her decision to major in physical education with a concentration in sports administration. She planned to become an attorney specializing in professional sports.

The plan shifted when Govan got to Rutgers University School of Law-Newark and learned how much she enjoyed litigation, mock trial, and clinical work. "Every class I went to, I said, 'Oh, this is interesting, I can do this.'" She decided to become a generalist, with a particular interest in litigation.

After working as a commercial litigator at major law firms in New York and New Jersey, Govan was sworn in as an assistant U.S. attorney in the District of New Jersey in 2011. She prosecutes federal criminal cases and has been assigned to the general crimes, organized crime/gangs, economic crimes, and cybercrimes units. She

has been chief of the public protection unit and, currently, serves as chief of the government fraud unit.

"I have always been drawn to helping people in more immediate tangible ways, where I can see the impact of my work more readily," said Govan "I'm now dealing with keeping people safe, making industries safe." Being a part of LSNJ's board is part of her commitment: "LSNJ is an institution that has truly changed people's lives, because civil legal services have helped people in need for generations. I want to be part of the next generation of leaders, to protect the legacy of the organization."

Govan is a life member of the Morgan State University National Alumni Association, an active member of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, and immediate past president of the Garden State Bar Association. Her schedule is busy but, "There will always be enough time for things that have to happen."





LSNJ Vice President and Assistant General Counsel Akil Roper, Vice President and Director of Pro Bono Operations Harold Rubenstein, and Pro Bono paralegal Janet Ashley train Verizon volunteers on New Jersey's expungement process.

New Partnership with Verizon Expands Pro Bono Capacity

Verizon and Legal Services of New Jersey have partnered to assist LSNJ clients in expunging their criminal records. The partnership began with Verizon's interest in criminal justice reform and its invitation to LSNJ to work together on a continuing project that merges the corporation's social interests with the needs of LSNJ clients.

LSNJ recommended expungements as an area where Verizon lawyers could provide pro bono help. Criminal records are often barriers to employment, housing and public benefits, even when the underlying events are decades old. With recent and anticipated

changes to expungement laws, this partnership is uniquely positioned to further the work initiated by LSNJ's Prisoner Reentry Project (PREP).

Verizon generously hosted several meetings and an end-of-year expungement training at its corporate headquarters in Basking Ridge. These events drew participation from Verizon's lawyers and other professionals. Two Verizon lawyers have already accepted expungement cases, and some other cases are awaiting placement. Moreover, after the LSNJ presentations and an overview of our work, a few other lawyers

in attendance expressed interests in additional areas of pro bono assistance including immigration and child welfare. Six Verizon lawyers have signed up to accept pro bono referrals from LSNJ.

The Verizon-LSNJ partnership is an opportunity for pro bono lawyers to expand their knowledge and skills outside of their usual areas of practice. It also offers the reward of helping someone who might otherwise not get legal representation. And for clients, particularly those seeking expungements, it is the chance for a fresh start.



Pro bono volunteer Ken Coughlin with LSNJ Executive Vice President and Assistant General Counsel Dawn Miller and chief attorney of the LSNJLAWSM Hotline Stephanie Setzer.

Ken Coughlin, former Senior Vice President of Sony Electronics and current professor at Pace Law School, was recently interviewed for LSNJ's PRO-BONONJ website and upcoming pro bono podcast series. The new series will highlight the variety of ways New Jersey lawyers can get involved with Legal Services' pro bono efforts and clients.

Coughlin established and ran Sony's pro bono program for 10 years and has twice received the LSNJ pro bono Equal Justice Medal for his many hours of service and commitment to our clients. But when he first approached Legal Services, he remembers needing a good deal of training.

His corporate bankruptcy and reorganization experience afforded some transferrable skills, but, he says "I knew nothing about personal bankruptcy." He credits the trainers and hotline staff of LSNJ for providing the necessary training and providing guidance at every step along the way.

Coughlin has since retired from Sony, but continues providing this important service to Legal Services clients. He receives files directly from the hotline and schedules callbacks from the comfort of his home office. He then walks each person through their options so they can make an informed decision about whether to file for bankruptcy.

"Our job is to kind of empower them—that they do have rights and that the world isn't ending. But the emotion that's often tied to their situations... family members who are grievously ill that they've had to care for and drop out of the job market... of course Social Security recipients; disability—people who are on disability who can't work—those kind of stories pull at your heart." Coughlin recognizes that some cases may hinge on sheer good luck, and that addressing this one issue in a client's life may not resolve all of their problems, but says, "Hopefully they walk away feeling better about themselves."

Coughlin has focused his pro bono efforts on bankruptcy, but that is just one area in which volunteers can assist LSNJ's low-income clients. With a wide range of opportunities, there really is something for everyone.

To view Ken's video and to register as a pro bono volunteer, visit www.probononj.org.

Announcing

LSNJ PROTECT (1-844-LSNJ-5776)

A New Legal Initiative for Victims of Trafficking

In April 2020, LSNJ launched PROTECT, a new statewide project providing legal representation to victims of human trafficking throughout New Jersey. New literature developed for the program helps people recognize the injustices that make them victims of human trafficking and also

explains their rights under such circumstances. Those rights include the ability to:

- Apply for immigration status.
 - Obtain an order of protection.
 - Get payment for unpaid work.
 - Deal with the child welfare system.
 - Get assistance with eviction and housing issues.
 - Secure back wages for work.
 - Expunge a criminal record.
 - Obtain victim's crime and compensation funds.
- Apply for public benefits.
 - Receive crime victim's compensation.



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.

LSNJ Responds in the Moment

Offers Public Webinar on Unemployment Benefits During COVID-19

www.YOUTUBE.com/watch?v=QJPPbdOp9Q



LSNJ's Sarah Hymowitz

chief counsel, Workers Legal Rights Project, responded quickly to the overwhelming need for information about unemployment benefits during COVID-19. Her webinar covered the traditional unemployment insurance program, as well as new benefits available to unemployed and underemployed New Jersey workers through the federal

CARES Act. The webinar was made available to the public on LSNJ's YouTube channel and garnered over 2,000 views in just two weeks.