

# POVERTY<sup>to</sup> JUSTICE



A Quarterly Report from Legal Services of New Jersey | Winter 2024

## Celebrating National Social Work Month

According to the National Association of Social Workers, it is estimated that there will be more than 782,000 social workers nationally by the year 2030. Social workers can be found in schools, hospitals, government, corporations, social service agencies, and veterans' centers, and at Legal Services.

Social workers at LSNJ respond



*LSNJ social work unit at the 2023 Annual Conference after receiving the Award for Group Achievement.*

to clients in times of crisis, such as homelessness and threats to mental or physical well-being as a result of mental health issues and physical or emotional abuse. With gathered

knowledge and experience, they are available to assess risk of suicide and other mental health crises and provide training to legal advocates on how to identify and respond to the non-legal needs of our client population.

LSNJ social workers also raise awareness among staff while responding to clients' basic needs by coordinating regular food drives and annual collections of back-to-school supplies and holiday gifts. As we approach National Social Work Month in March, we take this opportunity to thank our team of social workers for their unique contributions to our clients and to the cause of civil justice in New Jersey.



*LSNJ Outreach Coordinator, social worker Alayna Berg distributes information about Legal Services at a community resource fair organized by the Long Branch Public Schools.*

## President's Message



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

In December, I had the distinct privilege of addressing New Jersey's newest attorneys at a swearing-in ceremony at the War Memorial in Trenton. I am deeply grateful to the New Jersey Judiciary for allowing Legal Services of New Jersey the opportunity to address this new class of attorneys each year. As the president of the coordinating body of the statewide network providing civil legal assistance to low-income and vulnerable New Jerseyans, I endeavored to highlight both the devastating scope of poverty and the justice gap in New Jersey, as well as

the unique role attorneys can play in remedying these harms.

The civil legal issues encountered by our clients—New Jerseyans living in poverty—are critical, urgent, and often life-altering. And yet, according to the most recent Justice Gap study of the national Legal Services Corporation, low-income Americans did not receive legal help for 92% of their civil legal problems, citing the cost of legal assistance as the primary barrier to seeking and receiving assistance. In a high-cost-of-living state such as New Jersey, where more than 3.1 million people—or 34% of our state's

population—live in what our Poverty Research Institute defines as True Poverty, this cost barrier is particularly acute.

This reality is unacceptable, but it is changeable. Our client stories and outcomes make clear that the efforts of Legal Services staff, supporters, and pro bono volunteers—a group that includes many newer attorneys—*do change lives*. And as practitioners of the law, I believe we have a singular role—and responsibility—to stand for justice; to help all those we can within a legal system that is not—despite considerable progress—always fair, accessible, or equitable to all; and to work toward positive and transformational change of the law and legal system.

From everyone here at Legal Services of New Jersey, thank you for your continued support and commitment to equal access to justice for all New Jerseyans. We offer our congratulations again to the recently sworn-in attorneys and wish you all a bright start to the New Year!

## Our Clients Speak

# Faced With Poverty, “Independent Contractor” Receives Help With Pandemic Unemployment Assistance



A successful real estate agent, Donna would not, during “normal” times, qualify for Legal Services assistance. Nor would she, under normal circumstances, be eligible for the Unemployment Insurance program. During the pandemic, however, workers like Donna were eligible to receive assistance through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, created by the federal CARES Act and funded by the federal government. Donna, and many others like her, tried their best to continue working, but the various limitations posed by COVID-19 made it almost impossible to generate income. She describes a situation where house showings came to a screeching halt and closings that had once taken a couple months took closer to a year.

Donna received PUA benefits for a time, but after closing on a home and reporting her hours, she was erroneously cut from the program based on general unemployment rules. With no income for an extended period of time, Donna began to fall behind on bills and, at times, struggled to pay for basic necessities such as food. Despite filing appeals on her own, she got nowhere until she reached out to Legal Services. The LSNJ Workers Legal Rights Project assisted Donna with subsequent appeals and did not give up until the denial was overturned and she began receiving retroactive benefits.

Watch Donna’s Our Clients Speak video at [www.LSNJ.org/ClientsVideosStories.aspx](http://www.LSNJ.org/ClientsVideosStories.aspx)

*“I truly believe that I was entitled [to Pandemic Unemployment Assistance]. I just didn’t know how we were going to get to that point with all the bureaucracy of the state agencies. ... Think of all the people that, especially in my profession, that went into pre-foreclosure or modification loans to pay their mortgages because they didn’t have the job and they didn’t have help, who didn’t know to move forward or couldn’t qualify to move forward with Legal Services.”*



## A Melville “De” Miller, Jr. Justice Series Event

# Issues Impacting the Latinx/Hispanic Community in New Jersey Webinar, Sponsored by Verizon

On December 13, 2023, Legal Services of New Jersey presented the latest webinar in its Melville “De” Miller, Jr. Justice Series, *Issues Impacting the Latinx/Hispanic Community in New Jersey*. The “De” Miller Justice Series is free, open to the general public, and created in honor of LSNJ’s founder, De Miller. The programs highlight areas of social, racial, economic, and legal justice that have an impact on the low-income community in New Jersey—from new advocacy or government initiatives to specific issues or areas of law.

The panel was moderated by LSNJ board member Carlos Bollar, partner at Archer and Greiner, past president of the Hispanic National Bar Association, and past president of the NJ Hispanic Bar Association. After a brief welcome from LSNJ Senior Vice President Akil Roper and remarks from Lourdes Blanco, counsel, on behalf of the program’s sponsor, Verizon, Bollar introduced and then posed questions to the panelists, in turn.

Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, representing the 29th District, delivered opening remarks that framed critical issues impacting the community and highlighted steps her office has taken to improve outcomes through

legislation, particularly in areas of early education. She also suggested that we need to rethink the way we approach our traditional education model, in part to prevent “summer slides,” including Saturday classes and modified schedules.

Peter Rosario, president and CEO of Newark-based La Casa De Don Pedro, New Jersey’s largest Latinx-led organization, discussed the organization’s work in its three established “pillars”—early childhood, healthy homes, and community empowerment—and further highlighted the results of the organization’s recent

community needs assessment. Among other findings, he pointed to the fact that many in the community do not receive needed government assistance and services due to immigration status. He also discussed the need for social services in the community and that his organization in particular helps people access a variety of resources, including utilities assistance.

Anna Maria Tejada, partner with Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr and former president of the New Jersey Hispanic Bar Association, offered her perspectives on the challenges faced by women of color in the



*Anna Maria Tejada, Partner, Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr; and past President, New Jersey Hispanic Bar Association*



*Carlos Bollar, Partner, Archer and Greiner; past President, Hispanic National Bar Association; and past President, New Jersey Hispanic Bar Association*



*"We don't realize that the life sentence of our babies' outcomes by age three is already predetermined. Lead poisoning, gas appliances with asthma, dental screenings, obesity without access to healthy food. By age three, those health outcomes in our babies are life sentences, and we need to do more about that."*

*- Peter Rosario,*

*President and CEO, La Casa De Don Pedro (pictured to the left)*



*Teresa Ruiz, New Jersey State Senator,  
District 29; State Senate Majority Leader*

legal profession. She expressed the need for lawyers who represent and reflect the communities they serve and the importance of striving for and attaining diversity among judges in the courtroom. She also stressed the importance of mentorship to help foster career and personal development, particularly among young people of color.

Felipe Chavana, executive

director of Essex Newark Legal Services (ENLS), discussed the issue of displacement and voiced concerns about the systematic removal of low-income people of color from their neighborhoods through eviction and lack of affordable housing. Jose Ortiz, deputy director of ENLS, argued the need for collective action and to work against the destructive forces in the community described by Chavana.

Collectively, the panelists provided various viewpoints that touched on significant issues and provided a framework for further thought, collaboration, and action.

*This webinar was part of the Melville "De" Miller, Jr. Justice Series, named in honor of LSNJ's co-founder and former president. These free events are open to the public and intended to raise awareness of important social, legal, and economic justice issues. They 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.*

*The opinions and ideas expressed by the invited speakers, panelists, and community members are broadcast to inform and educate, to expand thought and stimulate discussion, and may not necessarily represent the position or views of LSNJ. Nothing contained herein is it meant by LSNJ to attempt to influence government decision-making, enacting, changing, or removing legislation, rules, or other covered government actions, nor is it meant to encourage others to contact government officials with that position.*

*To view this webinar, or to learn more about previous or upcoming Justice Series events, visit [LSNJ.org/JusticeSeries](https://LSNJ.org/JusticeSeries).*

## Pro Bono Updates



# We need your help!

## State Tax Legal Assistance Project (S-TLAP)

### Join us to:

- **Earn CLE credits and receive free training from Tax Law experts:** *Learn a new area of law or sharpen existing skills.*
- **Take advantage of recognition opportunities:** *Acknowledgement in social media posts, our Poverty to Justice Quarterly newsletter, and our websites; and the opportunity for recognition as an Equal Justice Award recipient.*
- **Be eligible for Madden exemption:** *Volunteer attorneys who provide free legal assistance and perform a minimum of 25 hours of pro bono service may be exempt from court-appointed pro bono assignments.*
- **Obtain other benefits:** *Malpractice insurance is included for referred cases, and fees are waived for most cases pursuant to R. 1:13-2.*
- **Most importantly, change someone's life, help your community, and feel good about it:** *Be a part of a broader access to equal justice movement. "Do well, and do good."*

At the heart of the State Tax Legal Assistance Project (S-TLAP) is a partnership between Legal Services and volunteer tax professionals. We are seeking attorneys, CPAs, enrolled agents, and other volunteers to join our panel. It's an opportunity to earn continuing education credits, acquire new skills, and help your community. Attorneys may claim exemption from Madden assignment requirements by providing 25 hours of service, take advantage of trainings, receive malpractice insurance coverage, and have fees waived by the court. LSNJ's S-TLAP Project provides assistance in cases before the Tax Court of New Jersey.

Individuals who need services will be directed to contact LSNJ through our online intake at **LSNJLAWHotline.org**, or our toll-free hotline (1-888-LSNJ-LAW). Callers will be screened for income and substantive eligibility, then referred to our volunteer panel for free services.

If you are interested in volunteering, you must register and enroll with LSNJ at **www.probononj.org**. Staff from our Pro Bono Initiative will contact you with opportunities to assist individual clients. Meanwhile, if you have questions, contact Janet Ashley-Naouli at **JAshley@lsnj.org** or Valerio Gonzalez at **VGonzalez@lsnj.org**.

**We look forward to hearing from you!**



# January is National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention and Awareness Month

Human Trafficking Awareness Month presents an opportunity to educate ourselves about human trafficking and learn the signs to identify it. LSNJ's PROTECT Anti-Trafficking Project assists clients who have been victims of, or witness to, trafficking activity with a range of legal issues including fighting for fair pay, witness protection, emergency shelter, and immigration. Project staff partners with law enforcement, other advocates, and service providers across the state to assist these vulnerable clients.

Most recently, PROTECT'S Avtar Sheppard-Singh hosted a table at the annual Attorney General's Human Trafficking Awareness Day to share resources about this important effort.



*Advocates with LSNJ's PROTECT Anti-trafficking project joined government officials, law enforcement, and community agencies from around the state at the War Memorial*

*in Trenton on Thursday, January 25 to raise awareness and distribute information about the help that is available from Legal Services.*



# Campaign for Justice

**Our annual Campaign for Justice** to raise funds for and awareness of the "justice gap" that affects low-income New Jersey residents is winding down, but it is not too late to make your donation! You can find our campaign brochure and make your donation at [www.LSNJ.org/CFJ](http://www.LSNJ.org/CFJ).

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[www.LSNJLAW.org](http://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](http://www.LSNJ.org) – An organizational website where you can learn about the work of Legal Services.

[www.PROBONONJ.org](http://www.PROBONONJ.org) – A site where attorneys can learn about and sign up for pro bono opportunities.

[www.NJEJLA.org](http://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.

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To be added to the mailing list  
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**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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