



# JUSTICE MATTERS

A PUBLICATION OF NEIGHBORHOOD LEGAL SERVICES



SPRING/SUMMER 2019

## Stories of Justice

# Protecting her family, gaining her life back

Women who file Protection from Abuse (PFA) orders often have similarly harrowing stories. Although the individual details may differ, the continuous mental and physical abuse and its exhausting cycle are the same.

For Jennifer\*, a 31-year-old mother of two young children, an abusive relationship with her partner, and later her husband, was unabated for their nine years together. Like many abusers, Jennifer's husband was controlling of everything she did, her whereabouts, who she talked to, and her parenting skills.

She tried to manage her life and her violent relationship as best she could for the sake of her children who were often present during her husband's rages that included scratching and beating. When her husband was angry, he would lock Jennifer in a room. Despite her screams for help, with no cell phone, she would fall asleep exhausted only to have cold water dumped on her to wake up

*"More than 1 in 4 women will be impacted by an abusive relationship at some point in their lives"*

and continue the fight. He also showed up at her place of employment and forced her to quit her job.

Jennifer's resolve to make things work ended one Thanksgiving when she decided to leave her home with her children and take refuge at her parent's house. Still her husband showed up at the door threatening and verbally abusing her. Police were called and urged her to file for a PFA which she did. But the violent behavior continued to escalate.

Lawyers from Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS) worked with Jennifer to pursue all the necessary channels and were able to get her a three-year consent final PFA order, to protect her and her children. Additionally, NLS connected her with an advocate from the Women's Center and Shelter to seek assistance with obtaining a divorce. At this time, she is beginning to reclaim her life, reaching out to her former employer to return to work and they have agreed to take her back when she is ready.

More than 1 in 4 women will be impacted by an abusive relationship at some point in their lives. (National Coalition on Domestic Violence). Taking the step to gain a PFA is a very personal and difficult decision, despite what might appear to be a simple choice to others. Often without the means to support themselves or their children, many women become victims of destructive relationships that literally threatens their lives. Through the work of NLS, these families can find support from the system designed to provide the protection needed.

*\*Client's name has been changed to protect her identity.*

To support NLS visit [www.nlsa.us/donate](http://www.nlsa.us/donate).



**NEIGHBORHOOD LEGAL SERVICES**

Because Justice Is For All

# NLS Butler Office Reopens

When funding became available to re-open NLS Butler office on a part-time basis after its closing five years ago, "It was a no-brainer for our organization," said NLS Managing Attorney Michelle DeBord. "The challenges in Butler County didn't go away during the period our office was shuttered and even though we were able to help Butler residents resolve civil legal problems by accessing civil legal aid via our legal Helpline or applying online, the ability to walk into an office and talk to an attorney in person is invaluable."

The Butler office of NLS offers civil legal aid in the areas of housing, family law, including Protection from Abuse and custody cases, consumer issues, and social security disability matters. In addition, DeBord points out "Butler is a temporary home for many

veterans. While vets face challenges like those of other people we help, their cases are often more complex because of the physical and/or emotional issues they may face once their service is over."

While the Butler office fields many of the same types of client issues as other NLS offices throughout the region, it is unique in many ways. "You have the prosperity of the Cranberry area and then you have northern Butler which is very rural, so we try to identify ways we can reach out to all who need our services to make them aware of help that is available," said DeBord.

According to Janis Hackett, Executive Director of the Butler County Bar Association, "We anticipate the unmet civil legal needs of Butler city and county residents will be better identified and

served now that NLS once again has a physical presence in our community. NLS complements other organizations who serve to help our neighbors in need."

Attorneys Alyssa Pietropaolo and Joan Tutak serve the Butler office which is located at 220 S. Main Street, Suite C Plaza Level. Beginning May 15, 2019 NLS' Butler Office will be open to the public on Mondays and Wednesdays from 9 am to 12 noon and from 1 pm to 3 pm.



*You're Invited*

## **BUTLER COUNTY OFFICE OPEN HOUSE**

**Wednesday, May 15 • 2:30 PM to 5:00 PM**

Join us for refreshments and an overview of the services we provide.



## Words From Penn

It's been a bit longer than usual since I've written

Words from Penn, but I'm very glad to be back because our quarterly newsletter is an important way for us to speak with our volunteers, supporters, staff, community partners and other stakeholders about everything we do throughout the year to provide free civil legal aid to those in need.

While our mission is steadfast, and has been so for over 53 years, the way we connect with people, deliver services, and partner with other organizations, evolves all the time. With faster ways of communicating and better methods for identifying need, we adapt. As a nonprofit serving a vulnerable population, we need to stay nimble in order to bring innovative programs, services and expertise to at-risk individuals and families in the most cost-efficient and effective way possible.

An example of how we are able to pivot and adapt is the re-opening of our Butler office. Six years ago, budget issues forced us to make the difficult decision to close the Butler

office. And while we continued to provide services from other locations, as well as online, for those in the community, it wasn't the same. New funding streams coupled with generous private bar and individual donations allow us to re-open the office and staff it on a part-time basis with two exceptional attorneys who are familiar with the county and the needs of its residents.

In this issue, you'll learn more about innovative programs and partnerships like the Community Engagement Center in Homewood, a collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh, which helps East End residents with affordable housing and homelessness issues. We have an update on the Justice for Families/Victims of Crime Act Program (VOCA) which provides civil legal aid to victims of crime who are experiencing civil legal problems as a result of their victimization and is one of a small number at NLS with no strict income requirements for the cases we take.

Of course, we wouldn't be able to create, staff and run any of the programs we do without your help. Generous donations and volunteer

support to our organization have provided for the growth of groundbreaking programs like VOCA, new Housing Opportunity Fund support and expansion of services to New Castle and surrounding communities. I want to personally thank you for helping us provide these needed services without worry that the lights will be turned off.

Finally, I'd like to mention long-time NLS family who are leaving the organization. Attorney Lorraine Taylor and secretary Karen Monk will be enjoying well-earned retirements, and NLS Technology Director Michael Polanichka is moving to sunny California to take the same position for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. We thank them for their dedication, hard-work and contributions on behalf of NLS.

In closing, I welcome your feedback on the news we share in this newsletter. Your thoughtful input and support make us a better organization.

Regards,

Bob Racunas

# Resources for East End Residents Available at Community Engagement Center

On a brisk Thursday evening last fall, hundreds of Homewood residents and community leaders were present to witness the grand opening of the University of Pittsburgh's Community Engagement Center (CEC). The Homewood CEC is the first of many planned by the university to bring its resources into underserved neighborhoods. The fully renovated center in the heart of Homewood's business district has meeting rooms, event spaces and a computer lab that are open to the public and community-based organizations.

Onsite services include assistance to local businesses and afterschool programming offered by various university departments. Rounding out the team of on-site providers is Neighborhood Legal Services. As part of the comprehensive community planning process to launch the CEC, neighborhood residents identified civil legal services as an unmet community need. In light of the rapid

redevelopment sweeping the east end of the city, NLS' involvement prioritizes civil legal aid which stabilizes affordable housing and prevents homelessness. With the financial support of the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) NLS hired Kellie Ware-Seabron as a staff attorney to focus on housing stability and related legal issues in Homewood (and adjacent areas) and the Hill District. Wendy Barbeau, a social worker dedicated to helping clients resolve social determinants of housing and food insecurity, recently joined NLS as well to strengthen this advocacy.

With a primary office in downtown Pittsburgh, Ware-Seabron spends time in the Homewood CEC every week. While there, she engages with residents and community organizations, learning about available resources and informing them about NLS and the project which allows for a wider scope of services to



*Kellie Ware-Seabron and the PITT Panther at the Community Engagement Center (CEC) Homewood's opening event.*

eligible clients, and the ability for them to meet with an attorney in the community. NLS also presents legal education workshops or clinics guided in topic by community interest and needs.



*Congratulations to NLS Staff Attorney Mary Ellen Droll, the 2018 recipient of the Lorriane M. Bittner Public Interest Attorney Award! Mary Ellen was recognized by the Allegheny County Bar Foundation at their 2018 Fall Foundation Reception.*



*From left: Jim Sandman, president of the Legal Services Corporation, Justice Debra Todd, Judge Kim Berkeley Clark, NLS Executive Director Bob Racunas and Senator Jay Costa.*

*Excellence Award recipient Stella L. Smetanka, Esq. with PLAN Board President Jay Alberstadt.*



**NEIGHBORHOOD  
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# Won't You Be Our Volunteer?

*The demand for civil legal aid continues to grow as does the need for quality pro bono legal assistance. NLS staff attorneys and volunteer attorneys help nearly 16,000 people each year. Unfortunately, also each year NLS turns away 10,000 others because of lack of resources. Volunteer attorneys bridge the gap between those who need assistance and those who receive it directly from legal aid. Please consider connecting with NLS as a volunteer fighting for fairness and justice.*

## **Represent Victims of Domestic Violence in Protection from Abuse Hearings**

Last year NLS staff attorneys and pro bono volunteers helped 1,745 victims of domestic violence secure a Protection from Abuse (PFA) order. A PFA can be the first step toward freedom from domestic abuse for those who have nowhere else to turn for help. Without an attorney to guide them through the process, survivors can feel re-victimized by the emotional and financial drain of obtaining a PFA. To volunteer, please contact Mary Ann Troper-Malley at 412-586-6134 or via email [troperma@nlsa.us](mailto:troperma@nlsa.us).

## **Helping Domestic Violence Victims Obtain Protection Orders**

CLE  
OPPORTUNITY

Friday, May 3, 2019 – 3 Substantive Credits, 1 Ethics Credit  
9 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. Registration Begins at 8:30 a.m.

This course trains attorneys to obtain final protection from abuse orders (PFAs) for victims of domestic violence. It is open to all attorneys interested in volunteering for NLS's PFA program. The law firm of K&L Gates will host this program at their offices located at 210 6th Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222. Free for attorneys or paralegals volunteering to take PFA referrals; \$150 for non-volunteers; \$50 for non-volunteers who do not want CLE credit. To register, visit [www.nlsa.us](http://www.nlsa.us) and click on the CLE tab or call Mary Ann Troper-Malley at 412-586-6134.

## **Make a Difference by joining Justice Rising Advocates**

LEADERSHIP  
OPPORTUNITY

As a group, **Justice Rising Advocates** for Neighborhood Legal Services engages the region's young professionals by broadening their understanding of civil legal aid and why Neighborhood Legal Services' advocacy is crucial to the fight for access to justice for all. This is your opportunity to lead, network and make a difference. NLS invites you to share your knowledge, apply your skills, volunteer, and learn from legal, business and community leaders. As individuals, **NLS Justice Rising Advocates** are committed to advancing the mission of NLS as they rise in the community and their careers. Get involved on the ground floor of this exciting new initiative! For more information, contact Julia Marasco at 412-586-6140 or via email at [marascoj@nlsa.us](mailto:marascoj@nlsa.us)

**DON'T DELAY! GET INVOLVED! VOLUNTEER TODAY!**

# Trauma and its Aftermath: A Guide to the Empowerment Lawyering Approach

What does “Empowerment Lawyering” mean? As some of NLS VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) attorneys have learned, “Empowerment Lawyering” is not about empowering the lawyer; it is about properly engaging clients to allow for meaningful and active participation in their cases. Quite simply, it’s all about empowering the client within a system which was not exactly designed with a traumatized client in mind.

Trauma is easy to see and understand in cases of domestic violence or child abuse. But traumatized clients can seek help for many different reasons, beyond just the scope of family violence, including often the interconnected-

ness of urban poverty and trauma. It is a sad reality that most clients seeking legal services representation have experienced some significant trauma and continue to experience the effects from that trauma regardless of how long ago it occurred or its severity.

So what does empowerment lawyering look like in practice? In an empower-

ment driven legal practice, attorneys use special methods of counseling and representation that incorporate an understanding of their client’s trauma history into every interaction, both with the client and on behalf of the client. At its core, empowerment lawyering is a method of legal counsel-



*Most clients seeking legal services representation have experienced some significant trauma.*

ing that is simultaneously client-centered and non-judgmental in nature. The theory is if the attorney recognizes the signs of trauma and adjusts their legal practice to meet the needs of the traumatized client, there’s increased likelihood of a positive and sustainable outcome for the client.

Understanding how to be an effective legal coun-

selor and attorney at law with traumatized populations and people is a skill all lawyers can aspire to develop. VOCA attorneys at NLS are already at work honing these important skills to better serve our clients throughout all aspects of our legal representation.



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# NLS Expands Services to Victims of Crime

Recognizing that civil legal services are an essential but often overlooked component of victim safety, NLS secured funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) to provide expanded services to crime victims through the Justice For Families Project. Funded by PCCD's Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant program, NLS is now able to address many of the civil legal issues resulting from victimization including custody, support, and housing.

NLS' Justice For Families program is one of a small number at NLS with no strict income requirements for cases, allowing staff and attorneys to address the safety, health, and civil legal wellness of crime victims. In this new program, NLS continues to use the law and community resources to address the immediate

civil legal needs of people in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, and Lawrence counties.

As societal challenges of poverty, interpersonal violence, addiction and crime persist, we see nonprofits stepping up to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals and communities. One such area of need has been support for crime victims navigating a complex legal system as they grapple with the fallout of victimization or trauma. In meeting that need, the Justice For Families program for crime victims, focuses on legal advocacy and court representation. Clients seeking support are able to stay safely housed, keeping custody or access to their children and are able to acquire Protection from Abuse orders as needed.

Lack of representation and limited options for support often leaves

victims vulnerable to their abusers and vulnerable to future legal complications. Each of our clients face unique legal challenges and this program aims to help them address those challenges. Throughout the evolution of this project, NLS has also been working to re-introduce itself to the communities it seeks to serve. Because NLS is distinct in its nonprofit civil legal work, we have found it critical to build open lines of communication with organizations and service agencies that share our values, and oftentimes share our clients. We see firsthand how much the people we serve, especially crime victims, benefit from resources and assistance that can only come from an informed and activated network of social service agencies and institutions.

## Contact Us

NLS provides service to residents in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence counties.

Call toll-free: **1-866-761-6572**

Visit us online: **[www.nlsa.us](http://www.nlsa.us)**

**Sign up** for more information via email!



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NLS' United Way Contributor Choice number is #2761 and our Equal Justice Campaign Contributor Choice number is #534.



Funded, in part, by the Commonwealth and through a contract with the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). The official registration and financial information of the Neighborhood Legal Services may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free within Pennsylvania 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement. Federal regulations applying to NLS require that we notify all donors that no funds can be expended by NLS for any activity prohibited under P.L.104-134 or otherwise prohibited by 45 C.F.R. § 1600 et seq.