

A Publication of Neighborhood Legal Services Association

John's Story


When John arrived at NLSA, he was facing eviction for unpaid rent. In his 80s and in frail health, he had nowhere else to turn. After reviewing his case, attorneys discovered that because he did not recertify for Section 8 benefits, his rent was increased and he was unable to make the payments. His landlord sued to evict him.

In addition to losing his home, John explained that he had no heat or food in his apartment. An NLSA social worker became involved in the case and help was enlisted through Emergency Case Management from the Department of Aging who supplied taxi vouchers, food and a space heater.

Because of John's dire situation, his NLSA attorney immediately addressed the heat issues and submitted a Reasonable

Accommodation, requesting that his client be allowed to recertify late for his Section 8 housing benefits due to his health conditions. His dedicated social worker continued to offer assistance, accompanying John to East Liberty Family Health Care Center where she worked with a doctor and nurse to support that Reasonable Accommodation and successfully advocated for John to continue receiving medical care through home visits. Recognizing the importance of good nutrition, his social worker secured Meals on Wheels, medical assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and long term home care through the Aging Waiver Program.


"So often, clients like John simply fall through the cracks," said NLSA staff attorney Mary Ellen Droll. "At NLSA we recognize the importance of a strong team including social workers, medical providers and other professionals, who can secure the necessary services to help get someone like John a safe home, nutritious meals and continuing long term care. It's really a privilege to be able to do what we do."

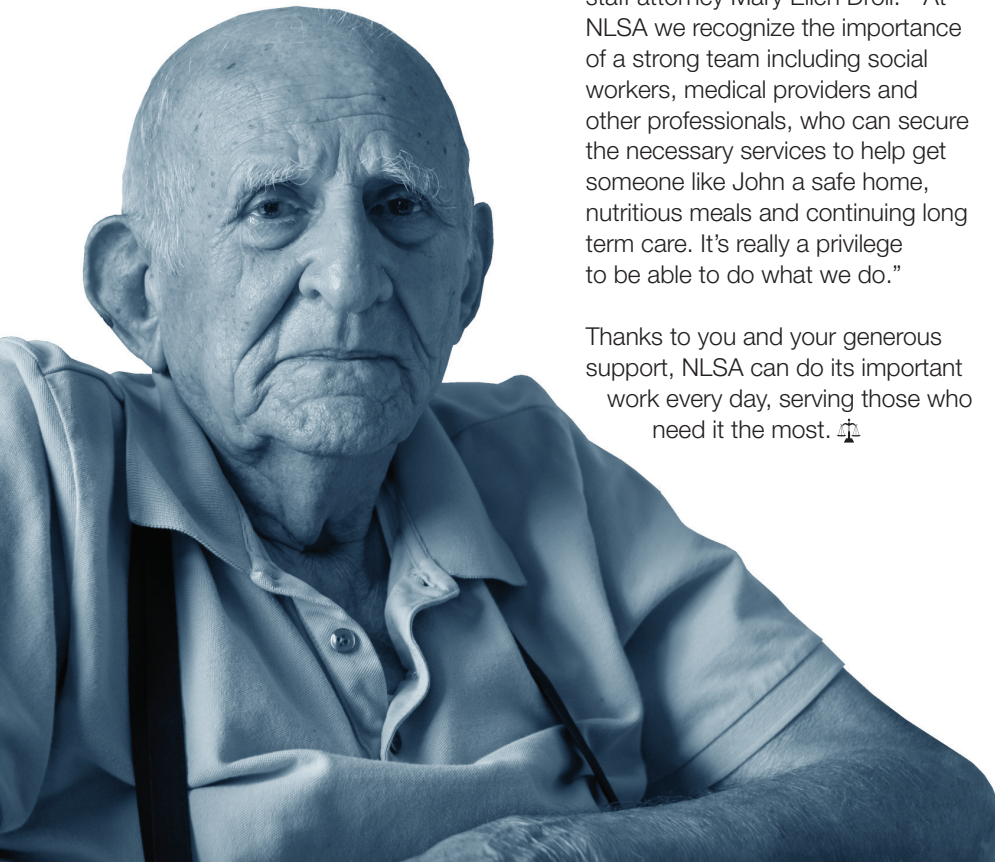
Thanks to you and your generous support, NLSA can do its important work every day, serving those who need it the most. 

Preserving Shelter

Losing a home can be a profoundly destabilizing experience. The day to day connections of life – work, school, family, friends – become difficult if not impossible to maintain when facing homelessness, dislocation and eviction. Difficult enough for adults, housing disruptions can cause children to have setbacks in education and contribute to chronic stress.

That's why preventing evictions and homelessness is a bedrock goal for NLSA and why NLSA devotes considerable staff resources to helping vulnerable individuals and families keep their homes.

Program wide, NLSA prioritizes its housing representation to prevent eviction from, and promote access to, subsidized housing, assist individuals who were wrongfully locked-out and provide advice on habitability and security deposit issues. We also help homeowners who face the loss of their homes through forced public sales and mortgage foreclosure. 



Words from Penn



Dear Friend,

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City, is a landmark work by Harvard professor Michael Desmond, who researches first-hand what it's like to experience eviction. Mr. Desmond concludes that for tenants facing eviction, legal representation can make the difference between staying in a home, eviction or even homelessness.

Recent studies show that tenants represented by an attorney are more likely to keep their housing. For every dollar spent on legal services, four dollars were saved on shelter costs. The provision of legal counsel produced much better outcomes for low-income tenants in housing court, independent of the merits of the case.

NLSA's dedicated team of attorneys, law interns, social services experts and other community-based professionals work diligently to make sure our clients have access to the services they need to address problems that may be the cause for eviction. We recently helped launch two promising pro bono partnerships to help us meet the growing demand for legal services to fight eviction.

Last year, NLSA helped over 1,500 families facing eviction. Our legal aid prevented eviction in over 75 percent of the cases we litigated. We are extremely proud of those results, and we aim to increase those numbers and continue to help more people stay in their homes. We take a multifaceted approach to helping our clients. We educate, we give advice and we go to court. We leverage community resources and partner with organizations that help us expand our services.

We are supported by federal, state and local governments, foundations, corporations, bar associations, private attorneys and the general public. We respond to challenges by becoming more resourceful, evolving and adapting to economic conditions.

As we look back on the past five decades and at all of our accomplishments, we want to thank our donors, who through contributions big and small support our efforts to provide social justice to all the communities we serve. It is through your generosity that we're able to help those who need it the most.

Thank you,

Bob Racunas, Esq., Executive Director

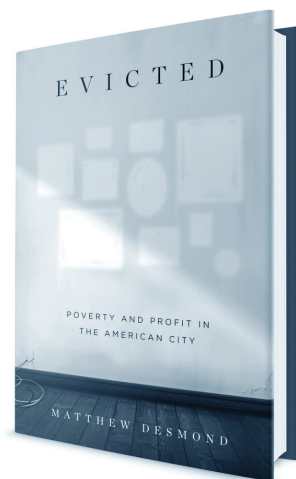
Housing Crisis Depicted in Landmark Book, *Evicted*

NLSA has handled more than 2,000 housing cases so far this year with nearly 70 percent of them involving eviction. "Without a safe place to live, most individuals can never get ahead – they can't educate themselves or their children, they can't work or become engaged and productive members of the community. In short, they can't lead a normal life," said Bob Racunas, NLSA executive director.

The housing crisis is a nationwide dilemma, and some would say, shame. It is also the subject of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, a landmark work of scholarship and reporting by Michael Desmond, a John L. Loeb Associate Professor of Social Sciences at Harvard University.

Called an "astonishing" book by the New York Times, *Evicted* delves into issues NLSA clients face every day – the lack of quality, affordable housing for low-income people and the problems this creates.

Desmond completely immersed himself in his subject, living in the predominately black inner city in Milwaukee's North Side as well as a trailer park in the city's South Side where mostly poor white families lived. He also spent time with landlords from both sides of the city to gain understanding of how they operate and make decisions as to who to accept as tenants, and who to evict.



29% of the cases NLSA handles involve housing insecurity.

We helped 1,567 families facing eviction.

Legal aid prevented eviction in 76% of the cases we litigated.

The lack of affordable housing has forced most low income families to spend a majority of their income on housing. Over half of poor families spend more than 50% of their income on housing costs. One in four spends over 70%. Tenants are not choosing to spend this much money on housing; they are forced to spend that because of the lack of affordable housing and the many landlords who know that desperate tenants are willing to pay whatever it takes to put a roof over their families' heads.

Evicted author Desmond outlines some solutions to the eviction crisis, including recommending funding for legal services be increased, an increase in the number of Housing Choice Vouchers to provide one to every eligible family, and in conjunction, legislation enacted which would prohibit landlords' refusing to rent to someone due to their source of income, including house vouchers. 🏠

NLSA law interns fighting for housing rights, case by case

Every day, low-income individuals and families face eviction in Western Pennsylvania. Because of the tight housing market and shortage of affordable homes, many of them will be homeless if they are evicted. This summer, the law student interns at NLSA have been committed to preventing homelessness for low-income tenants. They have provided clients – including single mothers, veterans, and people with disabilities – with specialized legal assistance and education about their rights.

NLSA law students have opened on average twenty new cases each week. With each case comes new challenges, for example, a 78 year-old woman living with her son was being evicted for end of lease term. With no place to go or legal recourse that would allow her to stay, a law student was able to negotiate an agreement with her landlord that allowed the client to stay at her current residence on a month-to-month basis until she could find housing.

In another case, a 50 year-old man was being evicted for numerous instances involving alcohol abuse in and around his apartment complex. The law students represented the client at a grievance

hearing with his management company, where they were able to prevent eviction by convincing the client to enroll in an alcohol rehabilitation program.

Often there is an underlying problem that is causing the housing issues so in addition to being well-versed in landlord/tenant law, law students are required to be familiar with a wide-range of other services available in order to positively impact individual clients' needs such as helping a family file a bankruptcy or enrolling a client in anger management classes.

For Zachary Roman, a rising 2L at Georgetown University Law Center, "Interning at NLSA has really opened my eyes to the impact values-driven lawyers can make to benefit individuals and communities." A native Pittsburgher, Roman adds, "I know for a fact that our community is a better place when everyone – minorities, low-income families, and the working poor included – are afforded a fair opportunity to call Pittsburgh home." 🏠



Matt Wiethorn, a rising 2L at Washington University School of Law • Ariel Oliver, a rising 3L at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law • Terry O'Donnell, a rising 3L at Duquesne University School of Law • Zach Roman, a rising 2L at Georgetown University Law Center

Hoarding: A different kind of housing crisis

Since September 2015 Hannah Arnett, a Masters Level social work intern with NLSA, and NLSA staff attorneys have worked with many individuals who are facing eviction due to hoarding. Compulsive hoarding disorder officially became a recognized mental health disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 2013, and because this disorder is fairly new it can be difficult to properly diagnose and treat. And that, in turn, leads to an increasing number of tenant's facing the threat of eviction because of the condition.

For Arnett, "Working with individuals who hoard has given me a whole new perspective on housing and eviction, and the importance of recognizing hoarders as people who are suffering from a disorder and need understanding and help."

Recently an elderly client, a former veteran and resident of the North Side, came to NLSA for help after receiving a notice to vacate due to an unclean and cluttered apartment. After visiting the apartment and meeting with the client several times, Arnett and NLSA Attorney Morgan Jenkins recognized that she had common symptoms associated with compulsive hoarding disorder.

Their first goal was to convince the client to consider social service assistance, a critical step in dealing with this disorder. Once she agreed, Arnett contacted the Area Agency on Aging to help secure home assistance with light housekeeping. From there, they also helped Arnett in coordinating a referral to a specialist at Community Human Services Hoarding Pilot Program. This program is designed to help people living with hoarding disorder reduce the items in their home, make sure that home is a safe place to live, and work on goals to remain independent in their own homes. Through the efforts of CHS and NLSA working together, the client was able to reduce clutter, clean her apartment, and therefore prevent her eviction.

Without the help of social service agencies dedicated to addressing specific challenges such as compulsive hoarding disorder, individuals like Arnett's elderly client may never be able to access the help they need. "Throughout this process, I've realized how important it is to maintain a professional relationship with other agencies or organizations that provide services to my clients so that we can keep on top of issues as they arise and work to keep our clients in livable, safe homes," she said. 🏠

NLSA Celebrates “50 Years of Sports Excellence”

NLSA recently celebrated our 50th Anniversary with a dinner event at the Wyndham Grand Pittsburgh, “50 Years of Sports Excellence,” honoring a special individual or team from each decade that the agency has provided civil legal aid. Huntington Bank served as Event Sponsor, while Peoples Gas was the Dinner Sponsor and UPMC Health Plan sponsored the Reception. All three organizations were generous in their support as were the Pittsburgh Steelers, Pittsburgh Pirates, law firms and area corporations.

The evening included a special tribute to three of NLSA’s original incorporators in 1966 – Governor Dick Thornburgh, Judge Justin M. Johnson and Attorney Eric W. Springer. NLSA Executive Director Robert V. Racunas thanked them for their leadership and inspiration in bringing free civil legal services to poor, low-income and elderly residents in the Pittsburgh region 50 years ago.

Susie Shipley, President of Huntington Bank’s Western PA and Ohio Valley Region, noted that NLSA had successfully been providing equal justice to thousands of area residents each year. She congratulated the organization on 50 years of extraordinary service to the community.

With Ellis Cannon serving as MC, 50 Years of Sports Excellence awards went to:

- 1971 World Series Champion Pittsburgh Pirates
- James “Jimbo” Covert – All-American Tackle at Pitt and with the 1985 Chicago Bears Super Bowl team
- The DeBartolo Family and 1991/1992 Stanley Cup Champion Pittsburgh Penguins
- Alan Faneca – 9-Time All-Pro Guard with the Pittsburgh Steelers
- 2006/2009 Super Bowl Champion Pittsburgh Steelers

Other special guests representing their respective teams included Steve Blass, Manny Sanguillen, Dave Giusti, Peter Taglianetti, Charlie Batch, and Tony Liberati who represented the DeBartolo family.

Event Chairman Rich Boyd, together with Honorary Co-Chairs Morgan O’Brien and Ralph Cindrich, provided another unique sports-oriented event for NLSA as a follow-up to last year’s Gridiron Gold.

We extend our sincere appreciation to all who supported the 50th Anniversary event. 🏆



first row: Larry Richert • Manny Sanguillen • Kim Ravenda • Bob Racunas
back row: Rich Boyd • Tony Liberati • Peter Taglianetti • Jimbo Covert
Alan Faneca • Steve Blass • Ellis Cannon • Paul Alexander

Pro Bono Partnerships Help Address Urgent Housing Issues

Helping low-income clients gain access to safe and affordable housing is a critical part of NLSA’s mission.

In order to better serve the rising number of individuals or families being evicted from public housing or terminated from the Section 8 program, NLSA reached out to the Pittsburgh Pro Bono Partnership. The Partnership has been assisting low income families in various ways since 2003, often through referrals from NLSA. Within days after the Partnership sent out a request for one of its member firms or legal departments to take over a new effort, called the Landlord Tenant Signature Project, the law firm of Meyer

Unkovic & Scott stepped up to volunteer. Since its start, 16 cases have been referred and 16 applicants have had their denials reversed and their applications accepted for a 100% success rate.

Last year NLSA undertook a second housing referral project to continue to meet a growing demand for help-- this time with the law firm of Reed Smith,-- where attorney Gerald Dickinson had been working to develop a program of pro bono housing assistance. NLSA and Reed Smith have combined forces in the Reed Smith Housing Rights Project, a referral program which has seen Reed Smith undertaking significant

representation of low income tenants facing eviction from subsidized housing.

In both partnerships, volunteer attorneys were offered free CLE training on public housing and Section 8 regulations, the reasons for which applications for either of these programs could be rejected, and the grievance procedure available to applicants who had been denied. These two programs illustrate the importance of legal service-private attorney partnerships in assisting low income families obtain and retain subsidized housing at a time when it is becoming increasingly scarce. 🏠

Contact
Us

NLSA provides service to residents in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence counties.
Call toll-free: **1-866-761-6572**
Visit us online: www.nlsa.us

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 Association 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 NLSA require that we notify all donors that no funds can be expended by NLSA for any activity prohibited under P.L.104-134 or otherwise prohibited by 45 C.F.R. § 1600 et seq.

