

2025

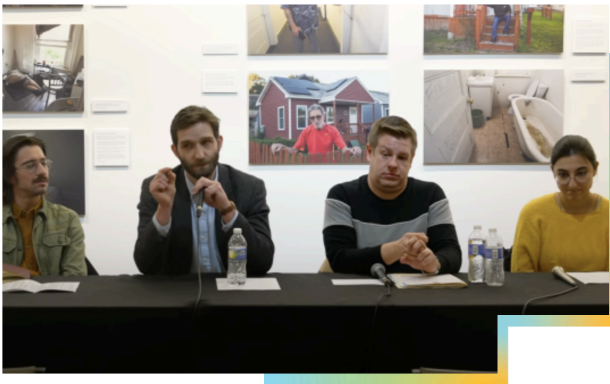
# SPRING UPDATE



## RESPONDING TO THE HOUSING CRISIS

In 2024, the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY's Tenant Defense Program closed 557 cases, benefiting 1,423 individuals. For those facing eviction in court, our team prevented eviction for 44% of households, delayed eviction for 51% of households, and reduced the amount owed by tenants by \$862,827. Even with this program success, the need is still great.

This spring, Staff Attorney, Sylvia Espinosa de los Monteros participated in a panel discussion moderated by Central Current. The public conversation examined causes of Syracuse's housing crisis and the ways the region could combat rising homelessness, stem rising rents and increase the region's access to quality housing.



The VLPCNY Renters' Rights Clinics continue to provide the community free legal consultations which help with pro se documents, answer habitability questions and address concerns about landlords, maintenance issues, leases and more. Visit our website at [vlpcny.org/get-help/housing](https://vlpcny.org/get-help/housing) to see an up-to-date list of scheduled clinics. We are always looking for more volunteers to help!

Recently, a report by Syracuse City Auditor Alex Marion shared concerning data about the community's housing crisis.

### 150%

The percentage that homelessness has increased in CNY since 2019. The majority live in Onondaga County.

### 22%

The number of unhoused individuals across Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oswego counties, an almost 30% increase from 2023.

### 22%

The percentage that Syracuse rent prices grew in 2024, the highest rate increase of any city in the nation.

## DEBT PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT:

The VLPCNY Debt Program team has been assisting a disabled senior Veteran facing a lawsuit over a fraudulent bank loan of nearly \$31,000. The bank recently filed a motion for summary judgment, but after providing limited scope assistance, we helped the client oppose the motion. At the hearing, the judge denied the bank's motion—a huge victory!

## ADVOCACY IN ACTION

VLPCNY recently hosted a TPS Clinic (Temporary Protected Status) for Ukrainian people in which we provided legal assistance to those who are unable to safely return to their home country. We also offered a Family Preparedness Clinic for families with one or more immigrant parents, where we helped people designate a standby guardian and delegate parental authority in case they are separated from their children. Both of these efforts would not have been possible without our amazing volunteer lawyers, law students, interpreters and child care providers during the meetings. These efforts are ongoing -- if you are interested in providing assistance to support these efforts please reach out.



## IMMIGRATION PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT:

This year we received asylum approval for a family from Afghanistan. In 2021, the mother died from COVID and just after their family imploded, their country followed suit. After evacuating to the US, our client's visa application hit a wall. They had to file for asylum (a much longer process) or face deportation when their parole ran out. We filed an asylum application in the current, extremely dangerous political climate, and received notification that it had been approved. We're thrilled to help provide a small bit of stability to this very deserving family.



In March, Executive Director, Sal Curran headed to Albany with the New York Immigration Coalition to fight for a \$165M investment in immigration legal services and the passage of the Access to Representation Act (ARA), which will ensure that all non-citizen New Yorkers who are in immigration removal proceedings have access to an attorney. This helps make certain they have due process and can apply for the humanitarian and family-based relief they qualify for. VLPCNY has experienced the loss of nearly \$500,000 of federal funding for immigration work this year. Increased funding from New York State is needed to make sure that we can fight for immigrant community members. Visit us on our website at [www.vlpcny.org/immigration](http://www.vlpcny.org/immigration) to view helpful resources including a Family Preparation Guide: Protecting Your Family In Case of an ICE Raid or Arrest.



## ENSURING LANGUAGE ACCESSIBILITY: ONLINE INTAKE IN SPANISH

VLPCNY continues to use technology to improve the accessibility of our services to clients throughout Central New York. We've built systems to allow clients to complete an online intake and sign up for available legal clinic appointments, as well as a system to match clients with pro bono volunteers. As our team has grown, we've prioritized hiring staff with both language and cultural competency that aligns with the needs of our clients. We are proud to have staff that speak Spanish, Farsi, Dari, French, Portuguese and Somali. In addition, we regularly work with interpreters and ensure that documents and forms are translated to any languages we need. This spring, we were honored to receive funding from the New York Bar Foundation, allowing us to translate our online intake to Spanish. Foundation grants assist non-profit organizations with essentials-of-life issues such as child support, consumer debt, housing, access to health care and education, and family matters such as domestic violence and family stability.



By raising awareness of the need for access to civil legal services and allocating resources to help meet these needs, the Foundation is making access to justice a reality for all New Yorkers.

## GROWING OUR PANEL OF SUPPORT FOR TRANSGENDER CLIENTS

Transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary individuals have become the focal point of a campaign of discrimination and harassment on a national level. New York's constitution and nondiscrimination laws have enshrined that these individuals are a protected class that cannot be discriminated against based upon their sex, gender identity, or gender expression. Attorneys: join us for a training May 30<sup>th</sup> at 1:00 PM to prepare to defend trans individuals from unlawful discrimination and harassment in New York. **Visit the Onondaga County Bar Association website at [www.onbar.org/events-programs](http://www.onbar.org/events-programs) to learn more and register.**



## FAMILY LAW PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT:

This year, our team helped a grandmother of three file an emergency custody petition after CPS called her about her grandchildren living in a hotel with their mother, who recently tested positive for methamphetamine. Although emergency custody doesn't typically work the way CPS described, our team worked diligently with the Chief Clerk and the County Attorney to push the petition through. The client was able to obtain emergency custody the same day and is now safely back in Virginia with her grandchildren.





## AFFIRMING LGBTQ+ LIVES

The transgender community is facing a barrage of attacks from the federal government. In this moment of crisis, we're calling on New York state leaders to take bold action to protect and support transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals right here at home. At VLPCNY, we've been flooded with calls from worried parents, students and families.

The work we do is possible in part because of the Lorena Borjas Transgender Wellness and Equity Fund (TWEF). Demand is rising, and increased funding is paramount. The results of our work speak for themselves. **Among those we've served, 99% reported improved self-esteem, and 95% felt safer.** We are urging Governor Kathy Hochul and the state legislature to expand TWEF to \$8 million annually.

Our LGBT Program is grateful to be receiving support for our work in the Southern Tier from the Community Foundation for South Central New York for the first time.



## LEADING WITH COMPASSION

Hear from Director of LGBT+ Rights Program, Mallory Livingston, about the impact of the current political climate on her work at VLPCNY.

### Can you describe your role with VLPCNY?

I am the Director of the LGBTQ Rights Program which, in my 6th year heading the program we have served over 1,400 persons throughout Upstate NY. We provide free legal representation, education, recommendations and referrals to LGBTQ persons facing discrimination, primarily in counties located in Central New York, the Southern Tier and the North Country. The most rewarding part of my job is bringing together young lawyers from Cornell University Law School and LGBTQ clients from across upstate NY so that they can work together to resolve all manner of legal difficulties facing the LGBTQ community.

### How have you seen the recent executive orders impact the clients you serve?

The Executive Orders have been devastating to our community. Trans persons in our community are no longer able to have accurate identity documents. For the last 16 years, trans persons have been able to change the gender marker on their passports to match their gender identity without any trouble. The current administration has reversed this longstanding rule so passports for trans persons must use the gender marker they were originally assigned at birth.





## In what ways can the community support your work? Do you have any specific volunteer needs at this time?

We need attorneys willing to handle discrimination cases on a pro bono basis, especially with regard to discrimination in schools. We also need attorneys willing to handle appellate work on a pro bono basis or to provide their expertise to assist our staff in handling appellate cases on our own.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT SUPPORT

In March we were thrilled to host an International Student Immersion Trip from the Syracuse University College of Arts & Sciences and Maxwell School. Staff and interns shared about their roles with our agency and the journey they took to get to this point in their career. These highly engaged undergraduate students asked great questions about the Syracuse community, access to justice and the ways in which students can collaborate and support the work of our agency. The participation of Interns is central to our mission to engage the broader community in legal service to those in need. We prioritize increasing the pipeline to the legal profession for individuals who are passionate about advancing the cause of equity and racial justice in their work.



## THANK YOU, INTERNS!

**Zach Eicher** has worked with both our Immigration and LGBT Rights Program. He's made a remarkable impression with his dedication, professionalism, and eagerness to take on challenging cases. **Alyzah Ziga** has generously applied her legal knowledge, empathy and problem-solving skills to our agency. She's passionate about working with those with diverse perspectives on life and the practice of law. **Nicholas Cerep** has consistently demonstrated exceptional initiative and support within our housing team. His approach significantly bolstered our efforts to ensure our community has the legal aid they need. **Lacey Caputo** has been a tremendous asset to our Family Law team. She consistently contributed her knowledge, dedication, and compassion to support both our team and the families we serve. These interns will be missed and our staff will be forever grateful for their contributions to our community!

## A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE FOR ALL

The VLPCNY team will carry on in fighting for the rights of immigrants, transgender people, and all marginalized community members. We will continue to do so by being rooted deeply in our values. **We need you** to work alongside us in these fights. **Visit us online at [www.vlpcny.org](http://www.vlpcny.org) to sign up for a volunteer opportunity or make a charitable gift today.**

