

# 2026



# SPRING UPDATE

## FREE, UNBIASED & HONEST STUDENT LOAN COUNSELING

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY is proud to be part of the Education Debt Consumer Assistance Program (EDCAP) Network. EDCAP is a program of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS). EDCAP was created to help New Yorkers navigate the student loan repayment system and maintain their financial health. Through our work, we are able to help clients:



- Determine their best student loan repayment options.
- Access loan forgiveness, cancellation, and discharge programs.
- Apply for consolidation, deferment, and forbearance.
- Resolve issues with loan servicers and lenders.
- Get out of default to prevent wage garnishments, social security offsets, and tax intercepts.
- Develop a comprehensive plan and strategy to tackle student loan debt.
- Understand financial aid offers and make a plan to graduate college with less debt.

# \$1.2 M

Since launching our Student Loan Debt Program, we have helped clients reduce their debt by more than \$1.2 million.



*The student loan information provided by my servicer was often difficult to understand and hard to keep up with due to so many rapid changes, but Pauline made everything much clearer. Without the help and support of VLPCNY, I would have been uninformed and completely lost while trying to figure out my loans. You have made the process easier to navigate and have helped me tremendously. - Student Debt Program Client*

# DEMOCRACY DAYS FOR LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

Tara Dion, Pro Bono Coordinator, recently participated in Democracy Days in DC, where she met with Senators and Members of Congress to discuss proposed bills aimed to protect and support LGBTQ+ communities. They would improve access to gender-affirming and culturally competent healthcare, restore specialized crisis services for LGBTQ+ youth, and ban harmful practices like conversion therapy.



They would also strengthen protections against discrimination in schools, workplaces, healthcare, housing, and public programs; block executive orders that limit LGBTQ+ rights; and require schools to adopt comprehensive anti-bullying policies that protect students based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and other characteristics. Together, these measures seek to ensure safety, dignity, and equal opportunity for LGBTQ+ people.



## KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER, UPHOLDING THE RULE OF LAW

For every immigrant served by nonprofit legal providers in New York, 10 are turned away. The system is being strained.

A new New York Legal Services Coalition report that was contributed to by VLPCNY details how the Trump administration's devastating immigration crackdown is driving unprecedented demand for legal help—while leaving thousands without representation.

**“The stakes in these cases could not be higher: family separation, prolonged detention, and return to life-threatening conditions,”** said Sal Curran of Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, Inc.

Without a lawyer, immigrants are far more likely to face detention or deportation, regardless of the strength of their case.

Please click [HERE](#) to read the full report, including our recommendations to expand capacity, protect due process, and keep families together.

# STAFF SERGEANT ALEX R. JIMENEZ NYS MILITARY IMMIGRANT FAMILY LEGACY PROGRAM

In December 2024, Governor Hochul signed the “Alex R. Jimenez Immigrant Family Legacy Act,” honoring non-citizen service members and their families. Named after U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Alex R. Jimenez, who was killed in Iraq in 2008, the law highlights the immigration challenges military families can face.

With funding from the NYS Office for New Americans, VLPCNY is launching the Sergeant Alex R. Jimenez Immigrant Family Legacy Program to provide immigration legal services to military families across New York. The program will be led by Naomi Godbey, who brings extensive experience in military immigration law. Naomi Godbey steps into this role following two recent victories for her military clients.

Pictured is a client from American Samoa who enlisted in the U.S. Army after high school and later became a U.S. citizen through military naturalization. His wife, from Samoa, was granted lawful permanent residency at their March interview, with Naomi’s support. As he prepares to deploy, he leaves knowing her status is secure.

In another case, the spouse of a deployed service member received conditional permanent residence just one day after their USCIS interview following an expedited filing.

These approvals are meaningful milestones and offer welcome good news amid growing uncertainty for many immigrant families.



## OTHER NOTABLE IMMIGRATION PROGRAM WINS

- Over the past few months, our clients have received green card approvals, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status approvals, and a Chief of Mission approval for a Special Immigrant Visa applicant.
- We successfully filed an adjustment of status application and secured a fee waiver for an 11-year-old Special Immigrant Juvenile client in Immigration Court, saving the family thousands of dollars in filing fees while the child remains in proceedings awaiting visa availability.
- We continue to support several families in completing immigrant family preparedness plans in light of increased immigration enforcement.

# FREE ESTATE PLANNING FOR SYRACUSE HOMEOWNERS

As part of a grant-funded initiative, our organization is now providing free estate planning services to low- to moderate-income homeowners (up to 80% of Area Median Income) in the City of Syracuse. Through this program, eligible clients are matched with staff and volunteer attorneys who can assist with estate planning needs, including preparation of a New York Last Will and Testament.

*Homeowners interested in these services are encouraged to connect with us:*

**Email:** [elder@vlpcny.org](mailto:elder@vlpcny.org)

**Phone:** (315) 471-3409 ext. 610



## SUPPORTING SURVIUORS WITH FAMILY LAW SERVICES

We recently launched a new area of family law programming focused on serving individuals experiencing domestic violence, in partnership with Catholic Charities and our Family Law and Immigration Programs.

Supported by a newly hired staff attorney, the program provides legal assistance to individuals impacted by domestic violence, particularly in addressing family court needs such as orders of protection, custody and visitation matters. We have recently observed an increase in family offense petitions, underscoring the importance of expanding these services.

## STRENGTHENING TENANT ADUOCACY

We were thrilled to celebrate Violet Bundi, Tenant Defense Staff Attorney, on being sworn into the New York State Bar this year. Violet is deeply passionate about advocating for individuals and families facing eviction, and she brings a thoughtful, professional, and supportive spirit to the VLPCNY team. We are incredibly grateful for her dedication and contributions to our agency and look forward to seeing the continued impact of her work in our community.



# CLIENTS AVOID EVICTION & ARE PROTECTED FROM IMPROPER CHARGES

VLPCNY represented a client facing eviction and possible homelessness from December 2024 through March 2026. After a warrant of eviction was issued, we successfully asked the court to reopen the case.

During the proceedings, Syracuse Code Enforcement found the apartment unsafe due to serious conditions, including lack of heat and hot water, mold, and pest infestation. We helped the client file a petition to compel repairs, and the court ordered the landlord to fix the issues and reduced the rent to \$0 in the meantime.

The client remained housed during the process and ultimately secured a new, safe apartment—avoiding homelessness.



Another client we served was facing eviction for non-payment of rent based on arrears she should not have been required to pay. In an earlier case, volunteer attorney Sylvia Espinosa helped the client reach an agreement with her landlord. The agreement stated that if payments were made, the landlord would not pursue eviction for 12 months—unless the client failed to pay future rent, damaged the unit, or caused serious disturbances.

Both the client and our office met all obligations under this agreement, including making payments through assistance funds and the client's own contributions. Despite this, the landlord later filed a new eviction case, claiming the client owed older arrears from before the agreement—amounts that were not included in the deal and were much higher than expected.

At the hearing, we argued that the agreement clearly covered the full understanding between both parties and could not be changed unless both sides agreed in writing. We also argued that the landlord violated the agreement by bringing the eviction case for reasons not allowed under its terms. The court agreed and dismissed the case. As a result, the client is no longer responsible for the disputed arrears and can remain in her home.

# BUILDING THE FUTURE OF JUSTICE

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY is proud to be working on a pipeline project with hopes to create a structured, equitable pathway for undergraduate and graduate students—especially those from underrepresented backgrounds—to enter legal and human services careers, fields that are often difficult to access without guidance, resources, and professional networks. By combining early exposure, skill-building, paid experiential learning, mentorship, and support, we aim to remove barriers while building a diverse, well-prepared workforce. We are proud of and grateful for the incredible contributions of our interns, and we are excited to see them continue to grow and succeed in their professional journeys beyond the internship.

## Meet Canab Sheekh Nuur – Immigration Staff Attorney

### How did you originally become involved with VLPCNY?

I first became involved with VLPCNY in 2019 as an undergraduate student, when I had the opportunity to intern through a program called Synergy. That experience gave me my first real exposure to immigration law and sparked my interest in the field.

### What are you doing now?

Now, I work with VLPCNY as a Staff Attorney in the Immigration Program, where I represent and support clients across a wide range of immigration matters.

### What initially motivated you to volunteer at a legal service agency during your undergraduate years?

At the time, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in law, but I was not yet aware of the many paths within immigration work. My internship experience gave me the opportunity to explore that area and discover where my interests truly aligned.

### Do you see a direct line between your early volunteer experience and the work you do today?

Absolutely. My undergraduate experience with VLPCNY was my first introduction to immigration law and played a major role in shaping my career path. Returning now as an immigration attorney feels like a full-circle moment. The organization that first inspired me is the same place where I now get to serve clients in a much deeper and more meaningful way.



## Meet Elaina Kernan – Housing Paralegal

### How did you originally become involved with VLPCNY?

I originally became involved with the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY through a community internship program with SRC, Inc. I was interested in the legal field, and SRC placed me with VLPCNY based on that interest.



### What are you doing now?

I earned my Bachelor's degree in political science and history from the University at Buffalo in December. I just started a position as a housing paralegal at Neighborhood Legal Services in Buffalo.

### What initially motivated you to volunteer at a legal service agency during your undergraduate years?

I was initially motivated to work at a legal services agency because I wanted to gain experience in the legal field. I felt that I could make a significant difference in people's lives by working specifically at a legal services agency.

### Do you see a direct line between your early volunteer experience and the work you do today?

My internship with the housing program at VLPCNY allowed me to familiarize myself with landlord/tenant law, which has provided foundational knowledge for my current work as a housing paralegal.

## COMMON CENTS AWARD RECIPIENT

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY was thrilled to be named the 1st Place Winner for the 2025 Common Cents Award from Cooperative Federal. Our organization was selected by a vote of credit union members, recognizing the important work our staff and volunteers do in the Syracuse community to advance last year's funding priority: Housing Security.



Common Cents is Cooperative Federal's Community Rewards program.

The more the credit union members use their CoopFed VISA debit cards, the more "small change" goes into the prize pool.

# USING TECHNOLOGY TO PROTECT FAMILIES

VLPCNY recently received a grant from The New York Bar Foundation to support our “Document Automation to Address Community Crises” project. The initiative will address urgent legal needs in Central New York, including immigrant family separation and unsafe housing conditions. Using the Gavel platform, families will complete plain-language questionnaires to generate legally sound documents without needing an attorney. This cost-effective approach helps prevent family separation, protect children, and expand access to justice through scalable, technology-driven solutions.

The Foundation recently awards grant in support of law-related programs across New York State, helping nonprofit organizations expand services, address urgent needs, and build momentum for future growth. **“Our grantees are doing important work in communities throughout the state, and these grants help them build capacity, meet urgent needs, and extend their reach,”** said Gioia Gensini, Chair of the Grants Review Committee.



# COLLABORATION IN ACTION: SOCIAL JUSTICE EXPO



Our team was happy to be at The Lender Center for Social Justice 2026 Expo. Workshop topics included grant writing, mental health, data collecting, legal services, AI, conflict resolution and more. The Lender Center for Social Justice is a University center promoting multi-disciplinary and dynamic collaborations that support the development of courageous and ethical scholars and citizens at Syracuse University who are committed to practices of social justice.

# GUIDED BY VALUES: RESPECT, EMPATHY, TRANSPARENCY, & COLLABORATION IN ACTION

This spring, VLPCNY had a fun and engaging week working with our consultants from Rebellious Root, a New York City-based, worker-owned cooperative dedicated to equity and social justice. As part of our agency's strategic planning process, we are refreshing our mission and vision statements to reflect our values. The team from Rebellious Root is guiding us through this process with a focus on ensuring alignment in all aspects of our work in the community.



To start, staff gathered for an afternoon session to begin envisioning the future of our organization. We ended the week by celebrating our volunteers over breakfast. This gathering not only expressed our deep appreciation for the incredible contributions of our pro bono supporters, but also included an interactive session led by Rebellious Root.

We look forward to continuing this process throughout the year and are excited to share our finalized mission and vision statements with the community.

**Together, we are helping ensure that everyone has access to justice & hope for the future.**

