

2024

# SUMMER UPDATE



VOLUNTEER  
LAWYERS  
PROJECT  
OF CNY, INC.

## INTRODUCING THE 5TH JUDICIAL DISTRICT HELP CENTER

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY is proud to partner with the 5th Judicial District and the Onondaga County Courts to launch a new volunteer opportunity for individual attorneys and law firms. The 5th Judicial District Help Center, an initiative being led by Judge Karalunas, will provide an opportunity for unrepresented litigants to ask an attorney simple legal questions and obtain attorney assistance with completing brief legal documents. This clinic is currently being held at the Legal Help Center at 401 Montgomery Street on Wednesdays from 9:30 AM - 11:30 AM.

**CALL TO ACTION:** Are you an attorney interested in volunteering at the 5th Judicial District Help Center? A recorded CLE training is available for you to view and VLPCNY staff are always present at the clinic to support volunteers.

We are also recruiting law firms interested in becoming a “Signature Firm Partner” by committing to send one attorney each month to this clinic. “Signature Firm Partners” will be credited in any flyers or program materials distributed in the community. If your firm is interested in this opportunity, we can provide a CLE at any location or virtually to train volunteers.

The 5th Judicial District Help Center is quickly becoming a vital community resource, expanding our ability to provide access to justice. Since the start of the clinic, we’ve hosted 9 clinics and already served 50 clients! Join us in providing access to justice to our Central New York community.

If you or your firm are interested in this pro bono opportunity, please contact Pauline Smith at [psmith@vlpcny.org](mailto:psmith@vlpcny.org).



# REMOVING BARRIERS TO SAFE, AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY HOUSING

## COURT-BASED LEGAL CLINIC

Volunteer attorneys help fill out pro se documents and answer legal questions about tenants' rights. Clinic takes place every Tuesday from 9:30 AM - 11:30 AM at Syracuse City Court, Part 1.

## TENANTS' RIGHTS LEGAL CLINIC

Questions about leases? Problems with a landlord? Concerns about maintenance? This free legal clinic operates at Salt City Market. Visit the VLPCNY website [HERE](#) for scheduled dates.

## TENANT DIGNITY & SAFE HOUSING CLINIC

Tenants with serious habitability issues can come to this clinic at the VLPCNY office and receive help filling out a petition. Visit the VLPCNY website [HERE](#) for scheduled dates.

## A GROWING TEAM

Gregory Johnson, our new Director of the Tenant Defense Program, has swiftly made his mark within our organization. With a background rooted in litigation, his courtroom prowess is matched only by his compassionate approach to clients. Gregory's dedication to understanding their needs and advocating tirelessly on their behalf have earned him accolades from both colleagues and clients alike. His expertise and willingness to always continue to learn and grow not only strengthen our team, they also ensure that every client receives the highest level of legal representation. We look forward to the continued contributions of this exceptional addition to VLPCNY.



**INTERN SHOUT-OUT:** Nicholas Cerep, our diligent law student intern, consistently demonstrates exceptional initiative and support within our housing team. His proactive approach and willingness to assist his colleagues have significantly bolstered our collective efforts. With continued support from our dedicated Tenant Defense Program team (Luz Marina Zender and Shayla Kisacky), we ensure success in providing essential legal aid to our community.



# THE CRISIS OF MEDICAL DEBT

Amelia Kohli, VLPCNY Debt Program Director, shared about the work we do to assist clients with court cases or judgments related to medical debt.

*Can you tell me a bit about the goals of the End Medical Debt Campaign?*

The End Medical Debt Campaign has a multi-pronged approach, which includes research that shows the magnitude of New York's medical debt problem, patient stories attesting to how medical debt has affected their lives, and collaborative efforts to make healthcare more affordable and equitable.

Through this campaign, VLPCNY has engaged lawmakers and elected officials with the facts surrounding what patients go through in medical debt lawsuits, and, on a wider scale, the deep and lasting impact that medical debt has on our community as a whole. Perhaps most alarmingly, we've also drawn attention to the outsized share of medical debt lawsuits in Central New York.



*What does the VLPCNY Medical Debt Program do for the community?*

The VLPCNY Debt Program provides legal advice, advocacy, and representation to patients who have struggled to pay medical bills. If someone is being sued for a medical bill the Debt Program can help the patient respond to the lawsuit, work towards a resolution of the medical bills, and investigate to make sure the hospital or medical provider took all the steps necessary to screen the patient for financial assistance eligibility prior to filing the lawsuit. From 2023 to 2024, the Medical Debt Program has helped clients dispute over \$520,000.00 in medical debt from hospitals, medical providers, and medical credit cards. We have helped clients access hospital financial assistance, negotiate resolutions to the bills from medical providers, vacate default judgments, and defend against burdensome money judgments.



## *Can you tell me about a particularly interesting client/community partner experience?*

Harry Martin and his fiancée, Linda Koberna, contacted VLPCNY in June of 2023. Mr. Martin had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer the previous year and received medical treatment through providers at several local hospitals, including SUNY Upstate Medical University. Mr. Martin had health insurance through his employer at the time he received his initial diagnosis and later enrolled in Medicaid, but due to receiving incorrect information from his employer, and the employer refusing to cooperate with him regarding long-term disability and insurance options, there was a gap in medical insurance coverage in August of 2022.

During this period, Mr. Martin was admitted to SUNY Upstate. Mr. Martin applied for and received a discount for his treatment through Charity Care, but after his discharge began receiving bills for \$10,699.53. Mr. Martin attempted to negotiate with SUNY Upstate and explained that his income was now limited only to Social Security Disability Insurance. Unlike other local hospitals, who worked with Mr. Martin to completely resolve the debt, SUNY Upstate continued to pursue the additional amount and eventually filed a lawsuit against him in Onondaga County Supreme Court.

After being served with the Summons and Notice, Mr. Martin and Ms. Koberna contacted the Debt Program at VLPCNY. We agreed to represent Mr. Martin, and filed a Notice of Appearance, thus preventing a default judgment from being entered against him. We also began attempting to negotiate a settlement with the Office of the New York State Attorney General, who represents SUNY Upstate. Despite Mr. Martin's terminal illness, severely limited income, and willingness to reach a resolution, the Attorney General's Office would not agree to a settlement amount that was affordable to Mr. Martin. The lawsuit was still ongoing when Mr. Martin passed away from cancer in early September. Almost two months after he passed, the Office of the New York State Attorney General agreed to discontinue the lawsuit.

Just days before Mr. Martin's death, he and Ms. Koberna spoke with the Syracuse Post Standard about what they had experienced with medical bills and the debt collection lawsuit. Their willingness to share their story left a large impression on people in the community regarding the great toll of medical debt, which in turn helped push through policy changes relating to Charity Care and a hospital's ability to sue low and moderate income patients, included in the newest New York State budget bill.





# CONNECTING WITH OUR COMMUNITY



VLPCNY was honored to be chosen as a featured organization for a “We Care Wednesday” with the Syracuse Mets baseball team. We enjoyed the opportunity to do outreach, fundraise and cheer on the Mets.

Our team enjoyed a beautiful afternoon at the Syracuse Juneteenth flag raising. We are committed to fighting for racial justice, social justice, equitable access to justice and economic opportunity through outreach and legal services.



Staff and interns celebrated at Cazenovia Pride, Cortland Pride and CNY Pride this summer. Our LGBT+ Rights Program offers legal resources to assist those experiencing discrimination and/or harassment with regard to employment, housing, health insurance, public accommodations and more. We also offer free name and gender marker changes for trans\* individuals.

In June our Immigration Program was thrilled to be at the Bond, Schoeneck & King, PLLC sponsored table at the World Refugee Day Festival. World Refugee Day of Syracuse celebrates the contributions and achievements of refugees and immigrants in Central New York. The event has been held in Syracuse for over a decade.



Elaine Wolf of Life Force Healing Art facilitated a workshop focused on experiential practices that help us and our clients in the face of trauma. Support from a Health & Wellness Award from Excellus BlueCross BlueShield allows us to prioritize resources that improve our health and address factors linked to health disparities.





# CELEBRATING NEW AMERICANS

Recently VLPCNY attorneys helped an asylee from the Democratic Republic of Congo reunite with her eight youngest children. The client came to the United States in 2019 intending to return home after her trip, but was forced to remain in the United States unexpectedly due to circumstances related to her asylum claim. VLPCNY succeeded in obtaining asylum for the mother, but it was extremely difficult for her to be separated from her children. VLPCNY attorneys worked with the client to file derivative asylum applications for the eight children and to help draft temporary guardianship and power of attorney forms so that the minor children could be interviewed and travel to the United States without their mother. Our client was reunited with her children when they arrived by plane to the United States on Mother's Day. The children are now getting settled in their new home.



Naomi Godbey, Director of North Country Immigration Program and ONA Legal Counsel for the North Country, spent time this summer to meet with students, tutors and staff at Literacy of Northern New York to share information about free immigration legal consultations and services available to citizens and noncitizens. Cultivating collaborative relationships is a critical piece to serving our clients, engaging the legal community in pro bono service and communicating that everyone deserves freedom from systemic oppression.

## LEARNING, COLLABORATING & CONNECTING

Many members of our team were grateful to be able to attend the AILA (American Immigration Lawyers Association) conference in Chicago this June where we collaborated with immigration law experts around the country. The conference offered numerous training sessions, networking opportunities, expert guidance, and strategies to enhance our immigration legal practice.





# RECOGNIZING OUTSTANDING PRO BONO SERVICE



Each year on Law Day the New York State Bar Association proudly bestows the President's Pro Bono Service Award on individuals and entities who have rendered extraordinary pro bono service over the preceding year. VLPCNY was thrilled to celebrate Immigration Program volunteer, Mark Curley, who received the President's Pro Bono Service Award for the Fifth Judicial District. Mark has filed sixteen immigration applications for clients in need of legal services since he first volunteered in July of 2022 and has donated more than 100 pro bono hours. His efforts have meant that many Afghan and Ukrainian community members are able to remain safely in CNY while their home countries continue to be plagued by violence and warfare. Mark truly cares about his clients and works hard to obtain the best possible outcomes on their behalf.

**CALL TO ACTION:** VLPCNY's Upstate Pro Bono Immigration Project is always in need of pro bono volunteer attorneys, law students, translators and other volunteers to assist with our immigration cases.

Interested in volunteering?  
Contact Laura Cardoso  
at [lcardoso@vlpcny.org](mailto:lcardoso@vlpcny.org).



**Department of State**  
**Office for New Americans**

NEW AMERICANS HOTLINE: 1.800.566.7636

## PLAY, WIN, SUPPORT ACCESS TO JUSTICE

**ALL IN**  
**FOR EQUITY & JUSTICE**

**A CASINO NIGHT FUNDRAISER & PRO BONO CELEBRATION**

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7**

**6:00 PM**

**ROSAMOND GIFFORD ZOO**



Our popular casino night fundraiser and pro bono celebration will take place on November 7 this year at the Rosamond Gifford Zoo. Join us for a chance to bring home amazing raffle items, raise funds for VLPCNY and celebrate the work of our dedicated Pro Bono Champions. Buy your ticket and join the fun

[HERE.](#)