

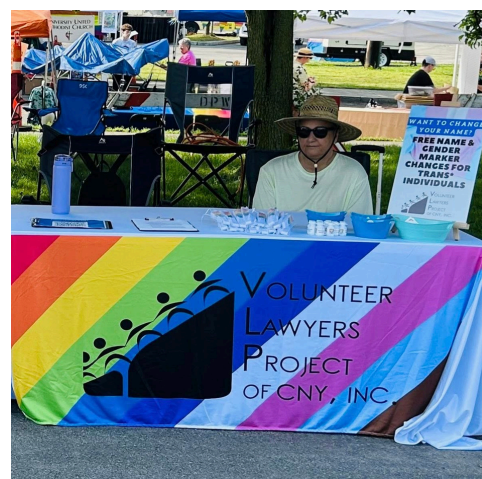
# SUMMER UPDATE 2025



## REFLECTING ON CLIENT ACHIEVEMENTS

**Debt Relief:** This spring, VLPCNY had the honor of assisting Linda, a 72-year-old retiree, in resolving a decades-long burden of student loan debt. Linda had taken out Parent PLUS loans to support her children's education and had been making payments for years. Despite her efforts, she was still facing a staggering balance of over \$198,000, with monthly payments around \$900—a near impossibility on her fixed income from Social Security and a modest pension. Struggling to make ends meet after retiring due to health issues, Linda turned to VLPCNY for help. Our team reviewed her case and helped her apply for a Total and Permanent Disability (TPD) Discharge—a federal program that forgives student loan debt for individuals with qualifying disabilities. After months of careful monitoring and advocacy, we were thrilled to receive confirmation in May that her entire loan balance had been discharged by the U.S. Department of Education and Mohela. Linda now moves forward with financial peace of mind, free from the crushing weight of unaffordable debt—a powerful reminder of the life-changing impact of accessible legal help.

**LGBT+ Rights:** A VLPCNY law student fellow was assisting with a name change for a minor client who urgently wanted their legal name to reflect their gender identity and presentation. Although the petition and supporting documents were sent to the client's parents, the process stalled due to difficulties with notarization and the inability to afford the court filing fee. The delay was deeply distressing for the child, who was eager to move forward. Recognizing the urgency, VLPCNY stepped in to meet with the family, guiding them through the paperwork to ensure everything was properly completed. We also conducted a detailed analysis of their financial situation and determined the family qualified for a fee waiver—removing a key barrier to filing. The family was deeply relieved and grateful. The client's mother shared: **"Thank you so much for going above and beyond for my child."** We're thrilled to report that the name change was just approved.



# HIGHLIGHTING POSITIVE OUTCOMES



**Immigration Program:** This summer, we had the privilege of supporting a 66-year-old client originally from Ukraine on her path to U.S. citizenship. After living in the United States as a permanent resident for 22 years, she became eligible to naturalize and was also able to complete her interview in her native language due to her age and length of residency. We submitted her naturalization application in December 2024. In the lead-up to her USCIS interview, held on July 15, 2025, at the Syracuse Field Office, we conducted a preparation session to ensure she felt comfortable and ready. Her daughter—who is also her primary caregiver—was by her side throughout the entire process, offering support every step of the way. We're thrilled to share that she passed her interview and is scheduled to take the Oath of Allegiance on August 14, 2025.

We're honored to have played a small part in this major milestone, and we look forward to celebrating her official welcome as a U.S. citizen.

**Eviction Defense:** At a recent Pro Se Court Clinic, VLPCNY assisted a courageous mother of three who is standing up for her family's right to safe housing. For over a year, she and her children—ages 2 to 14—have been living with severe habitability issues, including a persistent cockroach infestation that forced them to store all food in airtight containers. Despite repeated concerns, their landlord remained unresponsive. Matters escalated when her youngest son was hospitalized with respiratory issues, later linked to mold spreading throughout the bathroom due to poor ventilation.

Realizing her children's health was at stake, the client turned to VLPCNY for help. At the clinic, we assisted her in preparing an Article 7-D petition, a legal tool that allows tenants to bring their landlords to court over unsafe living conditions. With this petition, the client is asking a judge to order urgently needed repairs to make their home livable again. She will be representing herself in court with the continued advice and support of VLPCNY. Her strength—and her advocacy for her children's well-being—reminds us why access to legal guidance is so essential for families living paycheck to paycheck.



# THE IMPACT OF PRO BONO SUPPORT

**Elder Law:** Last month, we received a call from an elderly client living with disabilities whose only income is from Social Security Disability. He had never had any estate planning documents prepared and could not afford legal assistance. His wish was simple but deeply meaningful: to leave his modest belongings to his brother through a will. Thanks to the generosity of our volunteer attorney, Fred Marty, we were able to make that wish a reality. Fred promptly accepted the case, drafted the necessary documents, and even traveled to the client's home—where he lives with two roommates—to help execute the will. When we followed up with the client, he expressed immense relief and gratitude. He shared that, for the first time, he feels at peace knowing that his brother will be able to inherit his possessions without difficulty. The availability of this free service made all the difference during a challenging time in his life. This case is a powerful reminder that even small legal interventions can bring dignity, clarity, and comfort to those facing uncertainty. We're proud to support clients like him and grateful to volunteers like Fred who make this work possible.



**Immigration Program:** Mohammad and his family were evacuated from Afghanistan to the US in August 2021. He had worked as a soldier alongside the western forces for several years in Afghanistan, trying to help the new democratic movement and fighting against the Taliban. He had submitted an application for a Special Immigrant Visa when he first was evacuated, but it had been over three years and there was no news on it. We filed an asylum application for him and his family in early January this year. After his interview and further requests from USCIS for more evidence to support his claim, there were no updates on his application for over seven months. However, just a few days ago we received the asylum approval, ensuring Mohammad and his family will not be forced to return to Afghanistan where they would face fear of persecution and death threat. They now have a solid foundation of legal protection for their lives in the U.S. going forward.





# CRITICAL FUNDING GROWTH TO SUSTAIN PROGRAMMING

Due to changes from the current administration, VLPCNY has experienced funding loss, but the need for legal assistance is greater than ever. We were honored to have recently received critical support from the Department of Labor Transgender Wellness and Equity Fund in the amount of \$250,000/year for up to 3 years. This will cover much of our transgender name change and non-discrimination work and will fund 24 intern stipends over the course of the year for transgender, gender non-conforming and nonbinary (TGNCNB) students and paralegals, encouraging them to enter the legal profession.

In other good news, the Office of Victim Services has committed to \$420,000/year for 3 years, funding both immigration and family/matrimonial work for domestic violence survivors, as well as provide a trauma-focused therapist for our clients.

VLPCNY is also grateful to have received funding from The New York Bar Foundation, allowing us to translate our online intake to Spanish. By raising awareness of the need for access to civil legal services, the Foundation is making access to justice a reality for all New Yorkers. Donations enable VLPCNY to continue closing the justice gap and ensure equity under the law. Join our community of supporters at [www.vlpcny.org/donate](http://www.vlpcny.org/donate).



## ROLL THE DICE: ALL IN FOR EQUITY & JUSTICE

Join us at our annual casino night fundraiser to celebrate the work of the pro bono supporters and community members who come together to provide access to justice in CNY. Proceeds raised are critical to our ability to continue providing legal service to those in need.



**Thursday, November 6 at 6:00 PM | Rosamond Gifford Zoo**

Tickets & sponsorship available! <https://vlpcasino.givesmart.com>



# Q&A WITH SUMMER INTERNS

## AMELIA KHBAIS

### *What drew you to an internship with VLPCNY?*

Initially, what drew me to an internship with VLPCNY, was their strong focus on providing access to justice to underserved communities. I value work that makes a meaningful difference and empowers those who may have otherwise faced challenges accessing direct support.

### *What are you enjoying most about the experience?*

The Family Law Clinic gave me the opportunity to see client-attorney interactions firsthand, which helped me better understand the professional environment I'm hoping to enter. Having the chance to connect with clients in a legal setting made the work feel real and meaningful. It was extremely valuable to see how attorneys engage with clients, meeting both their procedural and supportive needs.

### *What are your plans post-internship?*

After the internship, I look forward to beginning my second year of law school! I can't wait to build on what I've already learned. I hope to stay involved by volunteering at VLPCNY when possible. The environment has been amazing and I know there's so much to learn by staying involved.



## ELAINA KERNAN

### *What drew you to an internship with VLPCNY?*

I found VLPCNY through the SRC Community Internship Program, which aims to fill resource gaps in nonprofit organizations while providing undergraduate students with internships. I was drawn to VLPCNY specifically because I am pursuing a legal career and have an interest in public law.

### *What are you enjoying most about the experience?*

The most enjoyable part of this experience has been helping people in the Syracuse area. Working directly with the community through clinics and providing housing resources to VLPCNY clients has been incredibly fulfilling. I've also had the opportunity to learn from the attorneys and legal professionals at VLPCNY, which I'm grateful for.

### *What are your plans post-internship?*

I plan to earn my BA in Political Science and History by the end of this year, and work as a paralegal before attending law school.



# A CHAT WITH TEAM MEMBER: KRISTIN NETTI

*How long have you worked with VLPCNY and can you tell me a bit about your role with the agency?*

I have been with VLPCNY since January 2024. In my role, I support our Debt, Family Law, and Elder Law attorneys by managing client communications and coordinating volunteer involvement.

*What do you most enjoy about the work you do?*

One aspect of my position that I enjoy the most is working at the Family Court Clinic. As much as the Family Court Clinic is busy and non-stop, being there is one of my favorite parts of my job because of the problem-solving and collaboration that I experience with my colleagues. It's challenging, and to keep such a big clinic going, I'm constantly learning how to maximize efficiency while keeping the needs of the clients at the forefront. I love the interaction between staff, volunteers, and clients, and I think each group impacts the others in a really special way. We learn as much from our clients as they learn from us, and getting to build relationships with our volunteers while we serve the community together is such a privilege.

*In what ways do you see your position serving the community? How do you envision your program(s) to continue meeting the needs of Central New Yorkers in the future?*

My position helps to bridge the connection between clients and attorneys. Our Civil Legal Programs serve a wide range of individuals--survivors of horrific domestic violence in need of protection, older adults seeking wills without the financial means to hire an attorney, and low-income clients facing unfair debt lawsuits that they cannot afford to pay. I have the honor of engaging directly with our clients, working to build trust, gather essential information, and provide reassurance before they meet with an attorney. I also have the challenge of fitting together many pieces of the legal puzzle as we serve clients and equip volunteers through high volume clinics.

VLPCNY's Civil Legal Programs continue to be an amazing asset to our community, as we strive to ensure that all individuals, regardless of income, have access to justice during some of the most difficult times in their lives.



# OUT & ABOUT IN CNY



This summer, the VLPCNY Immigration Program was proud to participate in Syracuse's World Refugee Day Celebration. World Refugee Day is marked by the United Nations. The event "shines a light on the rights, needs and dreams of refugees, helping to mobilize political will and resources so refugees can not only survive, but thrive."

Staff and interns connected with 500+ individuals at Pride Festivals this summer (Cazenovia, CNY and Cortland). We remain committed to fighting for the LGBT+ community by offering legal support for discrimination cases and providing free name and gender marker changes for transgender clients. Check out some of the amazing affirmations made by visitors at our table.



We had a home run experience with the Syracuse Mets this spring as our organization was featured for a "We Care Wednesday," sponsored by Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. A portion of the proceeds from ticket sales was donated back to VLPCNY in support of our mission. We loved connecting with spectators, sharing promotional materials, and cheering on the Mets!

## CONNECTING OVER COFFEE



Bagels, coffee and community - that was the general theme of our Breakfast Briefing, hosted this June. We were happy meet so many guests who may have been previously unfamiliar with our work. We shared about our mission, programs, and the values that drive us. Interested in learning more about our agency? Connect with Bethanie at [bhemingway@vlpcny.org](mailto:bhemingway@vlpcny.org).





# HELPING SENIORS WITH LEGAL NEEDS

We were proud to once again offer a series of webinars for older adults and caregivers, covering topics including Senior Scams & Fraud, Legal & Healthcare Essentials and Guardianship Basics. Watch the recordings, please on our [YouTube](#) channel. A big thank-you to our presenters for all they do to ensure our community has access to this critical information:

**Emilee Lawson Hatch, Bousquet Holstein PLLC**  
**Anthony Marrone, The Marrone Law Firm**  
**Nicole Lent-Pollard, NBT Bank**

## CELEBRATING OUR PRO BONO PANEL

In April, Barclay Damon LLP sponsored an appreciation event, allowing us to celebrate our amazing volunteers. Professor Suzette Meléndez gave an engaging keynote address about centering empathy and working with those who've experienced trauma. One of our clients graciously shared their story as a Colombian asylum seeker who, after having spent the day in immigration court fighting to stay in the U.S., accidentally drove across the Peace Bridge toward the Canadian border. A NY Times article recently featured work done by our pro bono volunteer Siana McLean, Partner at Richards and Jurusik, to help this client secure release from detention.

Read the [article](#) to learn more.



## NONPROFIT CONTRACTS

VLPCNY is helping lead the effort of a partnership of nonprofits working on reforming nonprofit contracting and payment. Thankfully, the bill (S7001 Mayer/A7616 Paulin) has passed the Legislature unanimously. If signed into law, it would do many things to ensure nonprofits can continue to provide essential services in our community, including:

- Automatic advances on all nonprofit contracts
- Minimum admin rate of 15% on all contracts
- Increase interest on late payments be at prime rate and make any interest that is incurred a reimbursable expense

Read the [white paper](#) for more information.

*"Given their crucial role in the State and regional economies and in delivering critical services, supporting NFP organizations must be a priority."*

**- Office of the New York State  
Comptroller 2023 Calendar Year  
Not-For-Profit Prompt Contracting  
Annual Report**