VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT OF CNY, INC.

2026 SUMMER UPDATE

HOUSING LEGAL HELP EXPANDS NORTH

Free legal information on housing issues is now available to more North Country residents through the expanded Eviction Defense Program offered by the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, Inc. in collaboration with Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York.

Adam Martin, Staff Attorney for the North Country Housing Program, is traveling throughout the region to provide free legal information and guidance to tenants. He is visiting Massena, Saranac Lake, Tupper Lake, Canton, and Potsdam to answer questions and provide educational information on a variety of landlord-tenant issues.

Clinics focus on landlord-tenant relationships and the eviction process while also addressing common habitability concerns. The program is designed to provide reliable legal information before housing disputes escalate, helping both tenants and property owners better understand New York housing laws and available resources. By connecting community members with experienced volunteer attorneys, the initiative aims to promote stable housing, encourage communication between landlords and tenants, and reduce unnecessary legal conflicts.

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY remains committed to increasing access to justice in rural communities, where free legal resources may be limited. North Country residents are encouraged to take advantage of these free educational meetings to learn more about their rights and responsibilities and to help ensure safe, stable housing for everyone in the community. Learn more on our website **HERE**.

CELEBRATING COMMUNITY
AT CNY PRIDE 🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍⚧️

In June, the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY proudly participated in the CNY Pride Festival, joining more than 22,000 attendees in celebrating the LGBTQ+ community.

Throughout the event, our team connected with community members, shared information about our free legal services, and welcomed visits from past clients. We also highlighted our LGBTQ+ Rights Program, which provides free civil legal assistance to eligible individuals with matters including name and gender marker changes, discrimination, family law, estate planning, and other civil legal issues.

Pride is an important opportunity to raise awareness of our services and ensure LGBTQ+ community members know where to find trusted legal support. Thank you to everyone who stopped by our table and helped make this year's celebration a success.

HONORING JUNETEENTH
THROUGH CONNECTION

This summer, staff were proud to attend the Syracuse Juneteenth Festival and celebrate with our community. Alongside our interns, we connected with attendees, shared information about the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY's free civil legal services, and let community members know that legal help is available to those who qualify.

Participating in the Juneteenth Festival was a meaningful way to honor the spirit of the celebration while strengthening our commitment to serving the community. We are grateful to everyone who stopped by our table and look forward to continuing to connect with our neighbors throughout Central New York.

BREAKFAST BRIEFING

COFFEE, COMMUNITY & JUSTICE

Recently, the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY welcomed friends, partners, and new supporters to a community coffee hour designed to introduce more people to our mission and the vital role we play in Central New York's justice ecosystem.

Throughout the morning, we shared how VLPCNY fits into the network of organizations working to expand access to justice. While we collaborate closely with legal aid providers, courts, bar associations, and community organizations, our volunteer-driven model allows us to fill unique gaps by connecting individuals with pro bono legal assistance and expanding the reach of legal services throughout our region.

Guests learned about our programs, met some of the dedicated staff behind our work, and heard how volunteer attorneys, law students, and community members all contribute to making justice more accessible. We also highlighted the many ways people can support our mission whether by volunteering their time and expertise, making a financial contribution, helping spread awareness, or connecting us with others who share our commitment to equal access to justice.

The conversations were thoughtful, inspiring, and a reminder that meaningful change happens when people come together. Together, we can strengthen our community and ensure that more of our neighbors have access to the legal help they need.

CLOSING THE GAP

HELPING CONSUMERS NAVIGATE DEBT

For many people, a debt collection notice or wage garnishment can feel overwhelming - especially when they don't know where to turn for legal help. At the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, our Consumer Economic Program exists to fill a critical gap in legal services by providing assistance to individuals facing consumer debt issues and student loan concerns.

There are few local legal resources for people facing debt collection lawsuits, money judgments, or wage garnishments, and VLPCNY is the only regional legal services program focused on student loans and education debt. Through our Consumer Economic Program, we help low-income individuals respond to debt-related legal actions and, when appropriate, provide full representation. Through our partnership with EDCAP, we also offer student loan guidance to anyone, regardless of income.

Recently, our debt team helped a client who discovered she was being garnished on two default judgments entered more than 15 years ago. Our review found that both creditors had applied an incorrect post-judgment interest rate, inflating the balances by more than $28,000.

We negotiated corrected balances, secured full satisfaction of one judgment, and reached a reduced repayment agreement on the other - helping the client avoid continued garnishment and save more than $28,000.

Stories like this demonstrate the importance of accessible legal assistance. When individuals have an advocate to help them understand their rights and navigate the legal system, they are better positioned to protect their financial stability and move forward with confidence.

We're recruiting attorney and paralegal volunteers to help individuals facing consumer debt issues. Interested in volunteering? Contact akohli@vlpcny.org.

CONSUMER DEBT CLINIC
NEW LOCATION

The Consumer Debt Clinic is moving to a new location to better connect the community with legal assistance. Beginning September 28, the clinic will be held at the Fifth Judicial District Help Center located in the Onondaga County Courthouse.

Clinic participants can receive:

- One-on-one meetings with an attorney
- Legal advice regarding consumer debt collection cases
- Assistance preparing court documents, including answers and motions
- Guidance on understanding legal options and next steps

Visit the VLPCNY website **HERE** for information about clinics and receiving help with debt issues.

A WELL-DESERVED HONOR
FOR SARA MCDOWELL

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY is proud to announce that Deputy Executive Director for Immigration Programs Sara McDowell has been named the recipient of the 2026 Denison Ray Civil Legal Services Attorney Award from the New York State Bar Association. She will be honored this September at the Association's annual Partnership Conference for her outstanding commitment to expanding access to justice for low-income New Yorkers.

Since joining VLPCNY in 2019 as its only immigration attorney, Sara has grown the program into a team of attorneys, DOJ-accredited representatives, and pro bono volunteers that has handled more than 3,200 immigration cases throughout Central New York and the North Country.

Sara's leadership has strengthened services for immigrant and refugee communities through innovative partnerships, community education, and rapid responses to emerging needs. She coordinated a region-wide legal effort to assist Afghan evacuees, has presented more than 33 immigration law trainings for attorneys and community partners, and continues to mentor legal professionals while building collaborative solutions that expand access to justice.

Known for her compassion and exceptional legal advocacy, Sara is deeply committed to helping vulnerable clients navigate complex immigration challenges with dignity and respect. Her vision, leadership, and dedication have transformed VLPCNY's immigration program and positively impacted thousands of individuals and families.

Congratulations to Sara on this well-deserved honor. We look forward to celebrating her achievement at the New York State Bar Association's Partnership Conference this September.

PLACE YOUR BETS
FOR JUSTICE

Join us on November 5 at the Rosamond Gifford Zoo for a casino-themed fundraiser celebrating our 2026 Pro Bono Champions. Professional dealers will teach the games while you enjoy refreshments, exciting casino action, and great company all in support of access to justice in our community. Buy your ticket **HERE**.

LEARNING THE LAW
MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Law student interns at the Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY gain valuable hands-on experience while making a meaningful difference in the lives of clients. Through direct client interaction and work across areas such as Family, Debt, and Surrogate's Court, interns develop a deeper understanding of both legal principles and the real-world barriers to accessing justice.

For many students, the experience is transformative. Carlos Diaz shared that working with clients showed him "**how real and complex the barriers to accessing legal services can be**" and demonstrated how even small contributions can make a significant difference.

Nabila Kabir similarly reflected on hearing clients' stories and seeing "**how quickly life can shift in a single, defining moment**." Her experience strengthened her interest in public interest law and gave her firsthand insight into the need for accessible legal services.

We are deeply grateful to our latest group of summer interns for the time, energy, and compassion they brought to VLPCNY. Throughout the summer, they contributed to our various programs and supported our work to expand access to justice for members of our community. We were pleased to celebrate their hard work and dedication at our summer picnic - a wonderful opportunity to thank them for their contributions and recognize the lasting impact they made during their time with us.

These experiences demonstrate the mutual impact of internships at VLPCNY: students gain practical skills and a deeper commitment to public service, while clients benefit from the dedication and support of the next generation of advocates.