

2025

FALL UPDATE



IN THE PAST YEAR, VLPCNY STAFF, TOGETHER WITH MORE THAN 600 VOLUNTEER ATTORNEYS, LAW STUDENTS, AND PARALEGALS, SERVED OVER 4,000 CLIENTS, BENEFITING MORE THAN 10,000 PEOPLE IN CENTRAL AND UPSTATE NEW YORK.

VLPCNY supports tenants in preventing eviction, assists survivors of domestic violence in finding safety, helps immigrants achieve stability and protection, and empowers transgender individuals to combat discrimination through affirming legal name changes and other vital services. In the last 12 months, we've successfully:

- Prevented or delayed eviction for over 2,700 individuals.
- Provided legal services to over 1,000 immigrants.
- Completed 160 legal name changes for transgender, gender nonconforming and nonbinary clients, with nearly every client reporting improved safety and self-esteem.

THESE SERVICES ARE LIFELINES FOR PEOPLE IN CRISIS.

IMPROVING CLIENT EXPERIENCE WITH A WAITING AREA RENOVATION PROJECT



If you've stopped by the VLPCNY office lately, you might have seen our newly renovated waiting area! We upgraded the space to make it more secure, welcoming, and inviting for both clients and community partners. The area now features locked doors that clearly separate public and private spaces. These improvements prioritize safety while creating a warm and comfortable atmosphere, so every visitor feels respected and supported from the moment they walk in.

ASSISTING NEW YORKERS IN NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF STUDENT LOANS

In September, Pauline Smith, Pro Bono Coordinator and Paralegal, testified before the New York State Bar Association about the vital role of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program in sustaining legal aid work. She emphasized the critical role of the program in sustaining New York State's public schools, universities, health care systems, and safety net programs. She underscored that PSLF is not merely a debt relief initiative, but a promise kept to those who dedicate their careers to public service—teachers, nurses, social workers, and other community-serving professionals. PSLF was created through bipartisan legislation in 2007 and offers federal loan forgiveness after ten years of qualifying service and payments. Without it, many essential workers could not afford to remain in lower-paying public service jobs, jeopardizing the state's ability to educate, heal, and protect its residents. PSLF has had life-changing impact and retains skilled professionals in the public sector. Proposed federal changes threaten to undermine PSLF's bipartisan foundation by excluding New York's teachers and state employees based on their employers' diversity or gender-affirming policies. These changes risk driving workers out of public service and weakening vital community institutions. We urge policymakers and the Department of Education to protect PSLF as a bipartisan commitment—one that strengthens schools, hospitals, and families across New York. "Public servants kept their promise," Pauline says. "Now our government must keep its promise to them."



"One of my clients had accumulated \$150,000 in debt pursuing a master's degree in teaching. When she found her first teaching job, she was paid only \$51,000 a year in a large public school district. Yet she dug in. She worked year after year, teaching science to students who faced unimaginable odds. And year after year, her students succeeded—they graduated at higher rates than their peers. Despite years of payments and multiple PSLF applications, she could not get approved. With advocacy and guidance from VLPCNY, her application was finally successful, and her loans were forgiven. Afterward, she could keep doing what she loved without the fear of being financially crippled by debt." – Pauline Smith

VLPCNY is proud to be a 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.



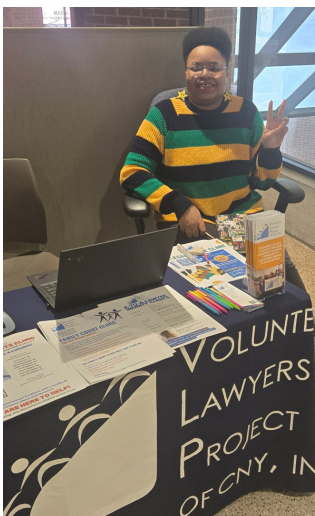
VICTORY IN LANDLORD TENANT COURT

A recent hearing in Landlord Tenant Court resulted in a favorable outcome for our client, after the court agreed that the landlord's use of a "Jane Doe" designation was improper.

The central issue in the hearing was whether the landlord could proceed with an eviction case using "Jane Doe" instead of naming the actual tenant. We argued that under CPLR 1024, this placeholder is only allowed when a petitioner has exercised "due diligence" in trying to identify the respondent's real name. To support our argument, we submitted an appellate case to the court and opposing counsel and provided email communications between the respondent and the landlord, including a copy of a lease that had been sent to the respondent in her own name several months earlier—evidence that the landlord clearly knew her identity. The landlord's attorney, by contrast, failed to provide any case law or documents supporting their use of "Jane Doe." After a short recess, the court agreed with our position and found that the landlord had not demonstrated due diligence in identifying the tenant, as required by CPLR 1024. Following the hearing, the client visited our office to complete a 7-D Petition—a legal action filed by tenants to address hazardous or unsafe living conditions. She is now on her way to file the petition in court. This result buys the tenant more time in her home and strengthens her ability to reapply for Section 8 housing. We remain hopeful that the 7-D action will further help to secure safe and stable housing moving forward.



BUILDING A CRITICAL PIPELINE



In 2025, VLPCNY's Board made strengthening our connections with community, and improving accessibility of services to those in need one of our key strategic plan goals. As part of this, we created the goal to design and offer a job readiness pipeline (including for law school, undergraduate, and high school students) from directly affected communities and communities of color – to build and foster diverse representation of future legal professionals.

To advance this goal VLPCNY applied for and is thrilled to announce support from the Department of Labor's Transgender Wellness and Equity Fund—\$250,000 per year for up to three years. This funding will support much of our transgender name change and anti-discrimination work, as well as provide stipends for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary (TGNCNB) students and paralegals. These stipends aim to encourage TGNCNB individuals to pursue careers in the legal field, advancing our strategic goal of strengthening the pipeline for directly affected individuals to enter the profession. Our interns play a vital role in our work, assisting with legal research, client intake, and administrative support.

Pictured here: Keondre Cole, Paralegal Intern.

SERVING AND STANDING WITH IMMIGRANTS

For citizens of Mexico living in the United States, the Mexican Consulate serves as an important source of support and connection to vital services. This fall, our immigration team was honored to collaborate with the Consulate to provide free legal consultations to community members seeking guidance on immigration and related legal matters. These events help ensure that individuals have access to trusted legal information and resources, empowering them to make informed decisions about their futures.



DID YOU KNOW?
**WE HAVE A WEBPAGE WITH
INFORMATION AND PLANNING
DOCUMENTS FOR IMMIGRANT
PARENTS. VISIT US ONLINE FOR THIS
IMPORTANT RESOURCE:**
VLPCNY.ORG/GET-HELP/IMMIGRATION

CATO RAID CLINIC

In early September, following a major immigration raid in Cato, NY, our Immigration Team, together with the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) and the Workers Center of CNY, mobilized quickly to meet the urgent needs of affected families. We organized an emergency family preparedness and immigration screening clinic, where community members worked with volunteer attorneys and interpreters to complete critical legal documents such as standby guardianships, powers of attorney, and other planning tools. Families also had the opportunity to meet directly with an immigration attorney or receive a follow-up call to better understand their loved one's rights and possible legal options. This immediate response has extended beyond the clinic itself. Our dedicated attorneys, volunteers, and partners continue to follow up with families, ensuring they have access to trusted resources, legal representation where possible, and guidance to navigate the uncertainty ahead. We are so grateful to our community of volunteers, with their help, we were able to respond as quickly as possible, at a moment of crisis.

**WE REMAIN COMMITTED TO STANDING ALONGSIDE OUR
COMMUNITY TO PROVIDE THESE CRITICAL SERVICES.**

CHIEF JUDGE'S HEARING ON CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES IN NEW YORK STATE

In September, Sal Curran, Executive Director of VLPCNY and Co-Chair of the Legislative Steering Committee member of the New York Legal Services Coalition, delivered in-person testimony at the Chief Judge's Hearing on Civil Legal Services in New York State.

Sal testified: "Our client gained lawful status and stability only because of VLPCNY's free legal services. Without us, he never would have known about Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, nor been able to navigate guardianship and immigration court on his own. He also would not have felt safe to appear in Family Court or go through the guardianship process if there was a risk that ICE could have picked him up in the courtroom. Yet today, immigrant youth face unprecedented threats. The federal government has cut funding for immigration services, attacked law firms providing pro bono immigration services, rescinded protections like deferred action and work authorization, and challenged New York's safeguards that keep ICE out of state courts without a warrant. Families lose food, medical, and case management support just as legal aid is being stripped away."

Marisol Estrada Cruz, Esq., the client's attorney, provided the testimony of an immigrant youth client that was granted Deferred Action and a work permit after escaping abuse. Essential to life services helped him gain lawful status and a sense of safety, stability and a hope for a better future.



SUPPORTING FAMILIES, ONE RESOURCE AT A TIME



This fall we were pleased to attend an event hosted by Fatherhood with PEACE, Inc., a program dedicated to helping fathers rebuild relationships with their children and strengthen their parenting skills. Collaborating with community partners like this is essential to raising awareness about our free legal services and making sure individuals know how to reach our team. We always welcome the opportunity to engage with community members, share information about our programs, and connect people with helpful resources.

Access to justice in Family Court is essential, especially for parents and caregivers navigating sensitive issues like custody, visitation, paternity, and child support. That's why our free Family Court Clinic is such an important resource for the community. Whether you're establishing a custody agreement for the first time or seeking to modify an existing order, having access to this kind of legal support can make a significant difference.

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

October is National Mental Health Awareness Month, and VLPCNY was honored to host volunteer attorney Sharon Ames and mental health practitioner Jondi Whitis for a FAST (First Aid for Stress and Trauma) training. This valuable workshop was open to both our staff and colleagues from other local legal service agencies. At VLPCNY, we prioritize addressing the impact of residual trauma and are deeply grateful for opportunities like this to expand our toolbox of resources for managing intense stress. Thank you, Sharon and Jondi, for your time and commitment to mental well-being!



UNPRECEDENTED FUNDING DELAYS

Earlier this year, a [white paper](#) was released that highlighted persistent delays in payment and a burdensome contracting process impacting New York's nonprofits. Over 700 signatories, representing an array of sectors including civil legal services, domestic violence support, civil rights advocacy, arts & culture, education, health, community services, environmental and more, are calling on the Governor for contracting reform in New York state. S.7001 (Mayer) / A.7616 (Paulin) would create consistency in contracting across all state agencies; expand and clarify renewal contracts; mandate advance payments and require the payment of interest by the state when reimbursements are late. This will cost the state nothing but save nonprofits hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, and make sure more money goes to providing critical services.

NETWORKING & EDUCATION

Four of our immigration staff members were able to attend this year's 2025 AILA (American Immigration Lawyers Association) Northern Border Conference, hosted by the AILA Upstate New York Chapter.



“Attending this conference was an incredibly valuable experience. The sessions provided both practical tools and insights on the shifting immigration landscape. I learned how artificial intelligence is already reshaping legal research and content creation, explored strategies for navigating humanitarian cases in today’s enforcement-heavy climate, and gained a deeper understanding of the ethical challenges facing immigration practitioners and our pro bono volunteers. The Customs and Border Protection update panel offered a rare opportunity to hear directly from field office leadership about current border practices. Beyond the content, the conference offered a chance to connect with colleagues from across New York state, and beyond. Overall, the experience deepened my knowledge, expanded my network, and left me energized to bring these insights back to my daily pro bono work.”

– Marisol Estrada Cruz, Supervising Immigration Attorney