

CONNECT RECOVER REBUILD

2020-2021 IMPACT REPORT



NORTHEAST NEW JERSEY
LEGAL SERVICES

Equal Justice for All

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OUR MISSION

Northeast New Jersey Legal Services (NNJLS)'s mission is to ensure equal access to justice for low-income residents of Bergen, Hudson, and Passaic Counties, New Jersey. No one should be denied a meaningful opportunity to have their day in court simply because they cannot afford a lawyer.

Dear Friends and Supporters,

Looking back on the events of 2020 and 2021, Northeast New Jersey Legal Services's (NNJLS) motto of Equal Justice for All continues to loudly ring true, perhaps more so now. We have been dedicated to the fight for justice for over fifty years, but the last two years have been unique in their challenges: a global health crisis, navigating remote work and sheltering-in-place, a national reckoning of systemic inequality, economic upheaval, and so much more. In the end, we worked against the odds and continued to serve the communities we care so much about in Hudson, Bergen, and Passaic counties. We might have weathered some of the worst circumstances imaginable but it has only made us stronger together.

From landlord/tenant disputes to procuring access to public benefits such as unemployment and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, NNJLS was standing alongside our hardest hit residents through it all. We aim to provide the highest quality of legal advice, aid, and representation to those who need it most, but unfortunately have the least amount of access to the judicial system. When reflecting on the last year, three significant words come to mind: Connect, Recover, and Rebuild.

We **connected** with our neighbors and peers as we faced unprecedented crises. When the world locked down, our terrific staff moved quickly to ensure our doors opened virtually to aid those in need with their legal troubles. When we saw cruel injustices in the streets, we came together from all backgrounds to make our voices heard. We stood together then and we stand together now.

As we **recover**, the resilience shown by members of our community, along with members of our staff, exemplified the fact that we can handle anything when we focus on uplifting one another. Living through a pandemic was (and still is) no easy task - but we did our very best to provide aid to those severely impacted.

Finally, we had the courage to carry on and **rebuild** in the darkest of times. Through quarantine, economic despair, uprisings, virus surges, and vaccine shortages - we moved forward together. Our clients and staff have shown incredible strength in the face of catastrophe.

It has been inspiring to witness. As we continue to do this work, we are constantly reminded of the strength and perseverance of those we serve. NNJLS's mission has always been, "...to ensure equal access to justice for residents of Bergen, Hudson, and Passaic Counties, NJ experiencing poverty. No one should be denied a meaningful opportunity to have their day in court simply because they cannot afford a lawyer," and as we continue to adapt in an uncertain world - we are even more than committed to that cause. Thank you for supporting and partnering with us on this journey.

John H. Fitzgerald, Esq.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Jack J. Wind, Esq.
BOARD CHAIR

NNJLS Programs and Practice Areas

Housing
Unlawful evictions, landlord-tenant disputes, and other legal issues that threaten housing stability.

Consumer Protection
Bankruptcy, identity theft, and deceptive lending and sales practices.

Family Law
Settling custody, child support, and other issues affecting families.

Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault
Restraining orders and other civil legal matters that affect survivors' safety and security.

Tax
Resolving unpaid tax and other IRS issues.

Seniors
Civil legal issues affecting seniors including housing, consumer, Medicaid, and powers of attorney, as well as elder abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation.

Reentry
Expungement of criminal records and driver's license restoration.

Education
School registration, special education, and disability accommodations.

Income Maintenance & Public Benefits
Unfair termination and denial of public benefits that support basic needs, including cash assistance, food stamps, disability and unemployment benefits.

Immigration
U.S. Citizenship, renewal of permanent residency, and other issues related to immigration status for legal permanent residents.

HIV/AIDS Representation Project
Legal services addressing the needs of persons living with HIV or AIDS.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

- John Fitzgerald, *Executive Director*
- Anna P. Navatta, *Director of Community Relations*
- Leah Ashe, *Deputy Director*
- Dianna Fuller, *Managing Attorney*
- Elliston Panton, *Director of Finance*
- Catherine Rivera, *Chief Operating Officer*

DEPARTMENTS

- Pro Bono Partnerships Project**
Cindy Lou Cuesta, *Director*
Nisha Thompson, *Manager*
- Development**
Joseph Calaceto, *Director*
- Community Outreach and Engagement**
Laura Arriaza, *Manager*
- Communications**
Lauren Puchowski, *Manager*

LITIGATION AND LEGAL UNITS

- Gregory G. Diebold, *Director of Litigation*
- Edgar Espinosa, *Assistant Director of Litigation*
- Consumer Unit**
Neil Fogarty, *Managing Attorney*
- Family Unit**
Angela Rodriguez, *Managing Attorney*
- Housing Unit**
Lawrence Sindoni, *Managing Attorney*
- Public Benefits Unit**
Leah Ashe, *Managing Attorney*
- Immigration Unit**
Edgar Espinosa, *Assistant Director of Litigation*



Staff in our Jersey City office gathers for a holiday gift exchange (and quick photo sans masks!) in December, 2021.

OUR WORK

Legal Services as an Instrument of Change, from the Civil War to Covid-19



Paterson, NJ, a century ago.

Legal services organizations address inequity, not by chance but by design.

The Freedmen's Bureau, established in 1865, provided legal aid for former slaves and poor whites. In the late 1800s, new groups sprang up to assist workers with wage disputes, women with domestic violence, and immigrants with poor living conditions. By the first half of the 20th century, nearly every city had its own legal aid society - usually underfunded and overworked.

Social reform in the '60s connected legal services to the anti-poverty movement. For the first time, Congress designated federal funding for legal aid. Making such services widely available would help people in poverty advocate

for themselves, argued authors Edgar and Jean Cahn in 1964. Here was a way to use the law, as Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach noted, "as an instrument of orderly and constructive social change."

And so we try to. The legal system is dynamic - it goes where the problems are. The cases our attorneys argue are often small repairs - they allow people to remain in their homes, put dinner on the table, give them, in the words of our staff attorney Lisa Fennell, "a little breathing room."

But these cases also create meaningful change. When one of our clients was denied housing, our staff attorney knew that the client was protected by emergency legislation - legislation

the housing authority hadn't been familiar with. The denial was immediately overturned, our client signed a lease on an apartment, and now the housing authority is aware of the new requirements.

As the pandemic upended peoples' lives, we were there to help. As people lost their jobs and couldn't pay rent, we represented tenants whose landlords told elaborate lies about them to force their eviction. We handled a surge of domestic violence cases. And we helped people apply for food stamps who'd never had to before.

We also changed the way we worked. In February 2020, anticipating the worst, we prepared a plan to continue all services and operations virtually. When the lockdowns began

the next month, we were ready. We continued to provide services, and our staff attorneys began virtual group meetings each week to share advice and compare notes. As you will read on page 17, we added trainings, clinics and advice sessions for our pro bono efforts. All these innovations proved so productive, we've kept them permanently.

As we continue to adapt to serve our clients, we're mindful of the role of legal services in the struggle for equality in this country. We want to be not just a provider of services, but an instrument of change. In these pages you will meet some of the people whose commitment, resourcefulness and hard work creates that change, every day.



Paterson, NJ, today.

Staff Spotlight

CONNECT



ADELINA HERRARTE
Assistant Unit Supervisor, Consumer Law

"I love being a community lawyer because I think it helps level the playing field."

Herrarte, who was born in Guatemala, immigrated to the US at age 9 with her family. Herrarte quickly picked up English, and as a teenager, found her skills in demand. "My parents had a lot of friends in the neighborhood who would bring us documents in English that they didn't understand, and because I was the fluent

English speaker, I would interpret and explain them. For me, this was probably the beginning stages of thinking about becoming a community lawyer."

As she worked her way through law school, Herrarte saw how difficult it could be for someone who spoke little English, or had few resources, to advocate for themselves on legal issues. For example, to file a complaint against a company who harmed you, the filing fee in NJ can cost \$250, "which for many people," she points out, "would be prohibitive." But if a legal services lawyer represents them and files the complaint, the court waives the fee.

For Herrarte, who has worked for NNJLS since April 2016, the idea of being an interpreter has stayed with her - instead of translating a foreign language, she helps people make sense of the law.

Says Herrarte, "I knew that I wanted to be a voice for people who would otherwise be steamrolled by a system they did not understand."



LISA FENNELL
Assistant Unit Supervisor, Benefits

"I so enjoy this work, because I can help people who need our services just to meet their basic needs. It just gives people a little cushion, that breathing room that sometimes you need."

Lisa Fennell grew up in Jersey City, where she still lives. After working for NNJLS for nearly 23 years, she says, laughing, that it is hard to even go to the grocery store without running into former

clients eager to chat. She began her law career in the private sector, but changed to legal services after her neighbors began coming to her for help. "I had so many clients who really needed the help," she says, "but who just didn't have the money. I found myself doing all this work for free, because it was hard to say no. I thought, I need to find a way to help my community and still get paid!"

"Each time I can assist one of my clients with getting health insurance, getting food stamps, keeping their benefits, it's another step toward helping people to sustain themselves."

Fennell knows that people can be reluctant to get public assistance, because it can feel like a failure. "I always give my clients a little pep talk," she says. "I want people to know that they can get through this. I tell my clients, this is not the end for you."

CONNECT

Our Staff: Different Paths, One Purpose

The diverse cultural backgrounds of our attorneys, paralegals, support staff and managers reflect the diversity of the communities we serve.



10
languages
spoken by staff:

French; Portuguese,
Spanish, Polish,
Hebrew, Arabic, Hindi,
Urdu, Korean, Danish



12%
Asian/
Pacific Islander

39%
Hispanic/
Latino

15%
Black/African
American

33%
White/
Caucasian

Our Partners

One of our chief sources of strength during the last two years was our partnerships. During the most difficult stretches of the pandemic it was a lifesaver to share resources, compare notes, and draw on the spirit and energy of our allies in this work throughout northeastern New Jersey. And it was equally energizing to stand in solidarity with our partners, neighbors, and communities as we denounced systemic inequity and cruelty, and worked for justice.



Photo: A gathering of partners and friends at a recent event, North Bergen Public Library's Health and Wellness Jamboree, included special guest Nicholas Sacco, the mayor of North Bergen (at center).

Our Partners

Act Now Foundation
Bergen County and County Agencies
Boys and Girls Club of Paterson and Passaic
Catholic Charities
Center for Food Action
Center for Supportive Schools
City of Jersey City
City of Paterson
Clifton Health Department
CNA of Bergen County
CNA of Hudson County
CNA of Passaic County
Community Health Law Project
Community Hope
CUMAC

Dvine Konektion
Englewood Housing Authority
Englewood Post Stroke & Disabled Support Group
Family Intervention Services
Family Support Organization of Bergen County
Food and Shelter Coalition of Hudson County
Franciscan Community Development Center
GBCA Head Start
Grandparents as Parents Alliance Inc.
Greater Bergen Community Action
Guardianship Clinic for Incapacitated Child
Hackensack Meridian and North

Bergen Public Library
Headstart
HealingSPACE
Health Coalition of Passaic County
Highlands Family Success Center
Hispanic Multi-Purpose Center
Hoboken Public Library
Hoboken Shelter
Housing Advocacy & Homeless Prevention (HAHP) Committee
Hudson County Alliance to End Homelessness
Hudson County Food + Shelter Coalition
Hudson County Ombudsman's Office
Hudson Pride Center
Hudson Speaks

Jersey City Board of Education
Jersey City Free Public Library
Johnson Public Library
JPMorgan Chase
Kearny Bank
Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)
Manavi
Meadowlands YMCA Family Resource Center
Montclair State University
New Destiny Family Success Centers
New Jersey City University
New Jersey Reentry Corporation
North Bergen Public Library
North Hudson Connection
OASIS

PACO Agency
Palestinian American Community Center
Palisades Medical Center
Passaic County and County Agencies
Passaic County Community College
Passaic County Surrogate Court
Passaic County Women's Center
Paterson Alliance
Paterson Financial Empowerment Center
Paterson Public Schools
Paterson Public Schools
Project SARAH
Provident Bank Foundation
Renew Life Center

SolidarityJC
Team Management 2000
The Bergen County Food Security Task Force
The Bergen Family Center
The Paterson Alliance
The Youth Success Network
Transition Professionals
Triangle Park Community Center
Univision A Tu Lado en Clifton
Wafa House
WellCare
Women in Transition
WomenRising
YWCA Northern New Jersey
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority

Staff Spotlight



LAURA ARRIAZA

Community Outreach and Engagement Manager

Laura Arriaza was born and raised in NJ. Prior to coming to NNJLS, Laura was the first Immigrant Social Services Coordinator at El Centro Hispanoamericano, a non-profit in Plainfield, NJ that provides affordable legal immigration services and free social services to all in the tri-state area.

What drew you to NNJLS?

I decided to apply to this job because of the mission to provide Equal Justice for All. As a Latina and first-generation American, I appreciate the way NNJLS values diversity within our staff and inclusivity with the clients we serve.

What is the most rewarding part of your work?

I thrive on connecting with my community and lifting them up in any way I can. I thoroughly enjoy that one-on-one connection I am able to develop with a potential client or community partner "in the field."

What specific needs in the community does your work address?

The need I try to address through my outreach work is eliminating barriers that the community has in terms of knowing their legal rights and who to turn to when a civil legal issue arises. My job is to close that gap through collaborating with agencies who more regularly serve our clients on a day-to-day basis with other essential needs.

In your opinion, why is the work of NNJLS important?

This work is so valuable because it evens the playing field of life. Without our free legal services, our clients would either have to go into debt trying to cover legal costs or continue to suffer in their current situations.

To NNJLS Staff: In Gratitude

We want to recognize the dedication and perseverance of our staff during the extraordinary circumstances of the last two years. It is because of your commitment to our clients that we were able to remain open, providing services that brought stability and relief to thousands who faced increasingly difficult challenges over the course of the pandemic. These were unprecedented times, and your hard work has made a real difference for so many.

Our Clients: 2021

11,046 Clients Assisted

8,102
female

2,944
male

BERGEN COUNTY

31.6%

HUDSON COUNTY

34.7%

PASSAIC COUNTY

33.7%

2,894
non-English speaking
clients, for whom we
provided a translator

9,293
cases opened
8,501
cases closed

26,711 Household Members of clients assisted

9,506
children

17,205
adults

Our Clients: Stories

Denied PPE at the Height of the Pandemic, then Fired

Mr. J worked as a superintendent in the apartment building where he lived, for which he earned an annual salary of \$10,400. In early April of 2020, when the number of Covid-19 cases was soaring, the company that managed the building asked him to show a unit to a prospective tenant. Mindful of his safety and others', and aware of state mandates for protection against the virus, he requested a mask and gloves. None was available, his supervisor said, and told him he would lose his job if he did not show the apartment immediately. When Mr. J refused, he was fired.

Our attorney understood that Mr. J had been treated unlawfully, in violation of recent state

legislation requiring employers to provide Covid-safe working conditions, and could be protected by the Conscientious Employer Protection Act (CEPA), the so-called "whistleblower act." NNJLS helped Mr. J file a letter with the management company protesting his treatment and requesting compensation for lost wages, which was awarded.

We were happy to recover at least some of Mr. J's lost salary, and grateful for the chance to remind his company of their responsibility to protect the individuals that work for them, even - perhaps especially - under tough circumstances like a pandemic.



After a Devastating Loss from Covid-19, Threatened With Eviction

Mr. M and his wife were having marriage difficulties when the pandemic began, and he had just moved out of the apartment they'd shared since the birth of their daughter. But when Mr. M's wife fell sick with Covid-19, he returned to take care of her and their daughter, who was then 14.

Neither Mr. M or their daughter were prepared when his wife became gravely ill from the virus and died. As they struggled with their loss, Mr. M asked the landlord to add him to the lease, so that he could remain there with his daughter. Instead, saying Mr. M had failed a credit check, his landlord told him to vacate the apartment by the end of the month.

Our attorney knew that the statewide moratorium on evictions related to Covid-19 would protect Mr. M's daughter as a tenant. Mr. M had been furloughed from his job at a medical company because of the pandemic, and also had steep student loans, but our attorney was able to secure a guarantor for him on the lease, persuading the landlord to add Mr. M to the lease as the head of the household. We were glad that Mr. M's daughter could remain with her father in the apartment she'd grown up in, allowing them to avoid the distress of eviction and potentially, homelessness, at a traumatic time. "It was what my daughter wanted," Mr. M says. "Her school is right there, all her friends are there." Staying, he says, "gave us some sense of stability."



"It was what my daughter wanted... Her school is right there, all her friends are there... [Staying] gave us some sense of stability."

Our Impact: 2021

Flooded out of her basement rental by Hurricane Ida, our client called a building inspector, who discovered the unit was illegal. **We were able to secure 6 months back rent** from her landlord to help the client find new housing.

Number of clients with Covid-19 related legal issues:
2,988

Our client's baby had medical conditions that required a ventilator and a feeding tube. When her landlord refused to fix a gas leak in the neglected building, PSEG shut down all utilities, and our client was forced to move out and take her son to the hospital for care. **We obtained a judgment** and several years later when the building was sold, our client received a significant sum from the proceeds.

*We helped **11,046** individuals with serious legal problems who could not afford a private attorney*

Our client's ex-husband had a history of assaulting and harassing her. After he took one of their children forcibly from her car, threatening to attack her and take both of their children, **we argued successfully for a Final Protective Order** to protect the family from further harm.

*We helped **2,834** senior citizens with legal matters that put their independence at risk*

Our standard designation for low-income is what LSNJ's Poverty Research Institute has identified as the bare minimum that a family must spend to avoid deprivation, or 300% of the Federal Poverty Level. By this measure, **nearly one-third** of New Jersey residents are living in poverty.

*We helped **2,393** clients facing eviction*

*We helped **1,799** survivors of domestic violence obtain protection orders and financial support.*

OUR VOLUNTEERS

Pro Bono Thrives, With a Lot of Help From Our Friends

When the pandemic began, we feared that our volunteer program would fare the worst—but instead it grew substantially. We're deeply grateful to our pro bono volunteers for the thousands of hours of advice and representation they provided, and for their willingness to adapt along with us. With their help, we piloted innovative programs that ensured continuity of services for our clients in a time of real fear and uncertainty.

One of our most successful efforts was a virtual model for advice clinics, held in both English and Spanish, which allowed us to actually increase the number of clients we serve with these clinics. This program has been so successful that we have kept it, folding it into a hybrid approach as our offices reopen.

We also used virtual sessions to train our volunteer attorneys and paralegals on specific legal issues that impact our clients. By following these virtual sessions with client meetings in breakout rooms, our volunteers were able to get immediate hands-on experience in the material they had just covered, and our clients benefited from freshly engaged and motivated volunteers. Like the virtual clinics, this is another innovation we plan to keep.

While we're eager to return to "business as normal," our pro-bono program is more nimble and more robust than it was pre-pandemic, and we could not have done it without the energy and dedication of our volunteers.

PRO BONO: VOLUNTEER IMPACT

In 2021, our volunteers...

*Provided **1,234 hours** of legal representation and advice, valued at **\$246,800***

*Worked on **more than 500 cases** across all of our program areas*

*Assisted clients in **89 clinic cases***

Helped clients in those clinics with naturalizations, return of security deposits, bankruptcy, and uncontested divorces

OUR FUNDING PARTNERS

Without the generosity and support of our funding partners, our work would not be possible:

Bergen County Division of Community Development
 Bergen County Division of Senior Services
 City of Paterson, Ryan White Program
 Hudson County Division of Community Development
 Hudson County Office on Aging
 Internal Revenue Service, Low Income Taxpayer Clinic Program
 Jersey City Department of Community Development
 Legal Services Corporation
 Passaic County Department of Human Services
 Passaic County Department of Senior Services

Pro Bono Innovation Fund of Legal Services Corporation
 State of New Jersey, Department of Community Affairs
 State of New Jersey, Department of the Treasury
 State Of New Jersey, Office of Victim Witness Advocacy
 The IOLTA Fund of the Bar of New Jersey
 United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women

Special Thanks to Our Pro Bono Partners

Kearny Bank
 JPMorgan Chase

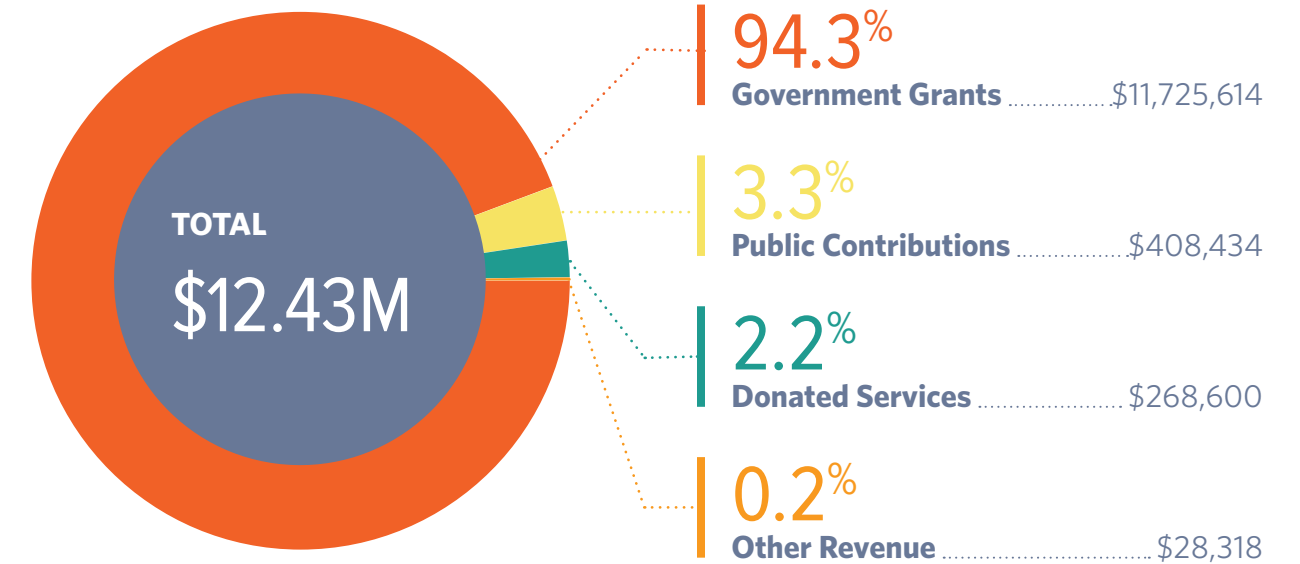


Board Spotlight: Jack Wind

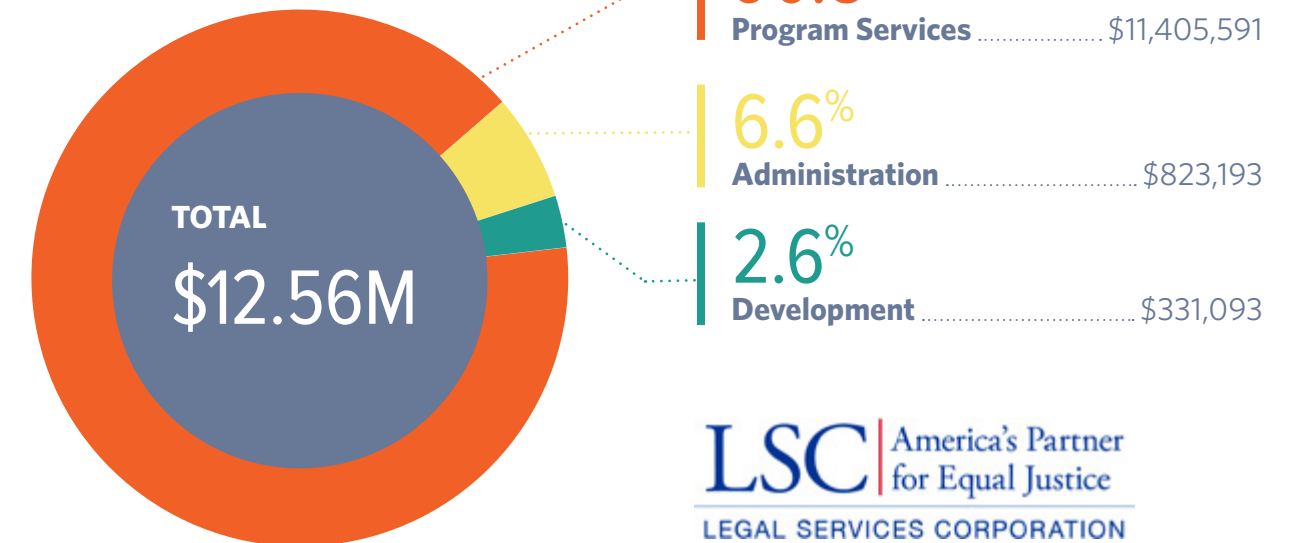
Our board chair is Jack Wind, shown here with his wife and four of his grandchildren. Heartfelt thanks for your leadership and all you've done for NNJLS!

2021 Financial Statement*

Revenue



Expenses



Northeast New Jersey Legal Services is proud to be a Legal Services Corporation (LSC) grantee, and we comply with all LSC conditions and prohibitions in acceptance of all funds.

* Fiscal year 2020-2021

Be a Part of Our Work for Equal Justice!

Volunteer

Make a difference! Private attorneys, law school students, and other volunteers are a critical part of our work. Contact us today to learn how you can help.

Email us at ProBonoNNJLS@lsnj.org or call
(551) 775-0009

Donate

Your support helps us provide critically needed legal services to families with legal problems they cannot solve themselves. To make a donation, please visit our website:

NortheastNJLegalServices.org/donate

Spread the Word



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Our Locations

BERGEN COUNTY

190 Moore Street, Suite 100
Hackensack, NJ 07601
(201) 487-2166

HUDSON COUNTY

574 Summit Avenue
Jersey City, NJ 07306
(201) 792-6363

PASSAIC COUNTY

100 Hamilton Plaza
Suite 200, Box 3
Paterson, NJ 07505
(973) 523-2900



NORTHEAST NEW JERSEY
LEGAL SERVICES

Equal Justice for All

NortheastNJLegalServices.org