



# PURPOSE AND DEDICATION

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF NNJLS



NORTHEAST NEW JERSEY  
**LEGAL SERVICES**

*Equal Justice for All*

**2022 ANNUAL REPORT**

# 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.

## Greetings to the NNJLS community!

2022 was a tremendously exciting time for us at NNJLS, and I'm happy to be able to share some of these changes with you. It was a year that saw a significant changing of the guard of our leadership. Executive Director John H. Fitzgerald, Esq., retired in July, after a fifteen year tenure here. With his leadership, NNJLS grew into the organization it is today, with a thriving presence in each county, and expert, groundbreaking litigation in our program areas.

After a nationwide search, we hired our new executive director, Leah B. Ashe, Esq. Leah has worked at NNJLS for 25 years, as an attorney and in management capacities, and she brings natural leadership, a deep commitment to the communities we serve, and new ideas. We are delighted to have her at the helm.

In addition to Jack's retirement we saw significant change in the makeup of our board of directors. Longtime members Barbara Comerford, Esq. and Patricia Van Tassel Cromie, Esq. also retired; both were members of the board of directors of Bergen County Legal Services prior to the merger that formed NNJLS, and continued to serve through mid-2022. In

addition we recently lost the services of Sue Lavelle, Esq. who was on the board of Hudson County Legal Services before the merger, and who continued to serve until the beginning of 2023, when she was appointed to the bench by Governor Murphy and is now a Superior Court Judge. We greatly appreciate the services of all three. They provided outstanding insight and direction that helped guide our organization for many years, and their presence will be missed. We are excited to work with our new board members, who bring fresh perspectives.

We are, in a sense, at the beginning of a new era. We have come through a difficult time with a renewed sense of purpose and focus, and we owe a debt of gratitude to those who brought us to this point. We're thrilled for what lies ahead, and we're grateful for our partners and supporters who share this journey with us.



**Jack J. Wind, Esq.**  
BOARD CHAIR

## Welcome to our 2022 annual report.

We chose this year's theme, "A Day in the Life," as a way to show the reach and quality of our services, and the dedication of our staff—to give a behind-the-scenes look at our work towards equal justice for all.

It's work that I am deeply familiar with. I joined this program as a staff attorney 25 years ago, and have served in multiple management capacities over the past 16 years. When Executive Director John H. Fitzgerald retired in July 2022, and I stepped into the role, I understood the daily challenges of serving our communities because I had been a part of that work for so long.

I know how committed our staff is to the program's work, and how dedicated they are to those we serve. I know the value of outreach, of building relationships with community partners, and of community legal education. Most of all I understand the importance of our daily presence: in the courts, in our communities, and for our clients.

Every day, our staff show up.

They make phone calls and meet with clients, argue cases in court, and engage with our communities. Sometimes there are thrilling wins, but there are also many obstacles, and in those moments, progress can be hard to see. Our staff does this work out of a deep sense of purpose and dedication. The communities we serve are the reason.

Our communities demonstrate what it means to be resilient in the face of hardships. While conditions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic improved in 2022, securing affordable housing, public benefits, and health care are still basic

daily challenges for many, as is navigating the changing court system.

During the pandemic our program also began working to establish a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan, to engage in critical conversations that help us to understand each other and our clients. This work is necessary to move the needle on equal justice for our clients, and to create an environment that allows our staff to thrive by fostering different perspectives. I could not be more proud to lead this program in these efforts.

I am pleased to share this report with you, our broader community, and I hope that it gives you a glimpse of the real progress we make by the end of every day.



**Leah B. Ashe, Esq.**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Leah Ashe, center, at an outreach event with Dianna Fuller, right, and Edward Madrigal



8:42AM **OUTREACH**

**“I could not be more grateful for such a dedicated team of colleagues and the welcoming environments the community partners provide. It is so important to show the community that we are here for them, and the perspective that attorneys bring is invaluable. In addition to providing an essential service in the community, this work reinvigorates our own passion for the mission of NNJLS.”**

LAURA ARRIAZA  
Community Outreach and  
Engagement Manager

**Edward Madrigal, our outreach associate, and Michelle Newton, education and benefits attorney,** prepare for an outreach hosted by Triangle Park Community Center in Jersey City.

Our outreach efforts were reinvigorated this year, as in-person events with our community partners returned throughout our three counties. Staff attorneys shared their expertise and conducted “Know Your Rights” presentations at resource fairs, food pantries, homeless shelters, libraries, and community centers. Presentation

topics include divorce, expungements, tenants rights, essential legal documents for seniors, elder justice, and federal tax issues.

Our relationships with community partners allow us to greatly expand our reach.

**“People need what you have, every day,”** says Stephanie Latasa, parent coordinator at the GBCA Head Start in Jersey City, where we provide legal education to families as well as staff. “Immigrants who have come to this country

and fallen on harder times simply because they did not know the law; tenants whose rent has been raised for the fifth time this year; those who are filing a police report for domestic violence. You are our first line of defense in preventing these problems from growing, and in helping people regain control over their lives. Prevention, education, and services to help families thrive even in very difficult circumstances are exactly what we need in a great community partner such as Northeast New Jersey Legal Services.”



10:06AM INTAKE

Intake specialist **Rafael Vega** conducts an intake interview with a woman whose identity was stolen and used to take out a large loan in her name.

Our intake specialists clarify the details of legal issues, and confirm that potential clients meet income and asset requirements for assistance. Staff can conduct intakes in English and Spanish, and use interpreter services for additional languages. Clients are often struggling with difficult situations, and intake specialists strike a balance between emotional connection and accurate reporting. **"I listened to her, I comforted her, and little by little I was able to get the information we needed,"** says Vega. **"Even when they're upset, people just want to be heard."**



Intake specialists Joana Medrano and Amy Rivera confirm a client's information at the front desk.



10:45AM HOUSING LAW

Housing attorneys **Randa Darwood**, above left, and **Gabe Fox** discuss an eviction case on the steps of the Passaic County Courthouse. In-person court appearances resumed this year, and more clients applied for our services in person. Trials for evictions and lockouts, as well as Section 8 terminations, increased significantly as many of the protections that had been established during the pandemic were phased out.



In Hudson County, hit hard by evictions, we established attorneys and paralegals on duty at the county courthouse. Here, our staff consult with a potential client and begin the intake process for legal representation.

In 2022, NNJLS prevented **5,989 individuals** from being evicted



Grandmother  
1 review  
★★★★★

"It took me some time to write this review as every time I started writing it I became overwhelmed. I am the legal guardian & grandmother of a 9-year old w/special needs who repeatedly was suspended because the school didn't understand his disabilities. Earlier this year I heard about Northeast New Jersey Legal Services, and went through their thorough acceptance process. Once approved, I was assigned to an attorney whose specialty is education and benefits.

My attorney and I met in person in the Jersey City office and on the phone several times, and after all facts were gathered she went to work. I had an open due-process case against the district at the state level, which she tackled first and successfully. Then she reviewed the

district's proposed IEP, line by line, and pushed back on several items. She worked with me to propose educational additions and changes that were suited for my grandson's needs. She never let up. While everyone else was enjoying their summer, my attorney was working on behalf of me and my grandson to ensure that when school resumed, he would be set up for success.

Now that school is in process, she checks in to see how he's doing and reviews any new IEPs placed before me. I am literally crying as I write this because no one knows the struggles I've been through on behalf of my grandson. My attorney was a godsend and without a doubt, there is a star in heaven with her name on it. Thank you, Northeast New Jersey Legal Services, for employing the best of the best."

11:30 AM

## EDUCATION LAW

A client posts a Google review about the services that NNJLS provided for her grandchild. Among other services, our education attorney helps ensure that students with special needs get the education that is provided for in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

"So many parents who come to us already know what is right, and what their children need in an educational setting," says Michelle Newton, education attorney. "I'm able to help them with the legal side of things—to explore how the law can help inform or support their position, what supports or services may be available to their child, and what steps they should take."

In 2022, NNJLS handled **54 education-related cases** for **37 individuals and families**

12:03PM

## DEI



DEI participants from each of our three offices convene on Zoom to discuss goals for the second phase of the process.

In 2022 we continued our work with Promoting Good, a non-profit organization, to provide program-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion training. We started this process at the end of 2020 with the goals of building a diverse, equitable, and inclusive team; building authentic, respectful relationships with clients; and strengthening our community relationships. Not all of the conversations have been easy, but they have been valuable, and have helped us better understand our responsibilities as an organization and as individuals. As we build our long-term plans, we are shifting our efforts from dialogue to action to ensure equity is at the heart of NNJLS's culture and work.

### NNJLS Staff:



46%  
Hispanic/  
Latino

13%  
Black/African  
American

30%  
White/  
Non-Hispanic

11%  
Asian/  
Pacific Islander





1:27PM

## PRO BONO

In this clinic held entirely in Spanish, **volunteer attorney and NNJLS board member Conrado Arroyo, Esq.** (standing at left) and **program coordinator Evelyn Crespo** (standing at right) take clients through the many forms needed for a no-contest divorce. In addition to providing legal advice and representation, our pro bono volunteers lead clinics to help clients represent themselves in cases including divorce, naturalization and recovering security deposits.

Completing divorce paperwork could take hours, but the team keeps it simple, explaining each step in Spanish. Crespo knows what a difference their help makes.

**“I had to go to court once,” she says. “It was nerve-wracking and frustrating, and I didn’t have anybody to tell me what to do or what to expect. I went because I knew I had the truth, and I had proof, but that was all I had. If I had known about legal services, I would have looked for help.”**

**“Like most kids whose parents did not speak English, I translated for them. I would miss school to translate for my mother at a doctor’s appointment, the DMV, or the welfare office. So I’m happy-more than happy-to do this now.”**

**CONRADO ARROYO**  
on why he volunteers with the Spanish-language clinics



2:14PM

## FEDERAL TAX LAW

**Rinu Cherian** and **Megha Dharia**, staff from the Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC), share tax-law information with parents at the GBCA Head Start in Jersey City. Our federal tax unit is one of only three of its kind in the state.

As the pandemic increased IRS processing times for federal returns, our unit handled many delays and denials for stimulus payments and refunds. One client had not received her refunds for two years due to IRS delays. Her daughter, who was applying to college, was eligible for a significant amount of financial aid, but had to provide proof of her mother’s income. Our attorneys were able to get the forms pushed through in time for our client’s daughter to receive the full amount.

In 2022, NNJLS handled **more than 100 cases** for clients facing federal tax issues



**3:02PM PUBLIC BENEFITS LAW**

In 2022, NNJLS handled **3,321 public benefits cases**. **1,984** of those were for **SNAP** (food stamps).

**Benefits attorney Stanley Sheats**, above at right, who has worked for NNJLS since 1989, discusses a case with **benefits attorney Angel Tirado**, who joined NNJLS in 2021. Our senior attorneys mentor newer ones, and each program area has a weekly round-table to discuss cases and share ideas.

In 2022, because of the pandemic, some government benefits offices continued to handle cases by phone instead of in person, which, Sheats notes, slowed and complicated the process. Our attorneys helped push cases through including the denial and termination

of benefits including food stamps, disability payments, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), unemployment, Medicaid and Medicare.

At right, benefits attorney Charles Oh looks through the documentation for a client whose welfare benefits were terminated.

Says Oh, **“I’m physically disabled, and I’ve been the recipient of many of the same benefits as our clients, so I’m aware of the structural flaws in the system. I understand how hard it can be. I went to law school because I wanted to be that guy, the one to help people get the help they deserve.”**



**3:15PM IMMIGRATION LAW**

At the US Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Newark, immigration attorney **Jen Donnelly** snaps a photo of her client, right, whose naturalization had been threatened by illness. He has just successfully become a U.S. citizen. Our immigration law unit represents citizens and immigrants alike with issues including adjustment of status, lost or destroyed naturalization documents, and removal proceedings.



In 2022, NNJLS handled **1,055 immigration/naturalization cases**. **526** of these were for **U.S. citizenship**. We prevented **54 victims** of violent crimes from being deported.



**3:55PM** CONSUMER LAW

One of the paralegals in the Consumer Law Unit, **Noemi Celentano**, examines a client's bills and other documents to prepare a petition to file for bankruptcy, which helps clients who have overwhelming debt. Other consumer issues we help with include identity theft, debt collection, deceptive lending, and expungements. **"These are common issues that people deal with on a daily basis,"** notes Celentano, who says that the best part of her work is providing clients **"with a fresh start."** Celentano, who grew up in Paterson, says, **"It's extremely rewarding for me to give back to my community."**

In 2022, NNJLS handled **348 bankruptcy cases** and **1,212 cases** for clients facing fraud, identity theft, and overwhelming debt



**4:10PM** SENIOR LAW

Senior law attorney **Zainab Awelenje** prepares to visit a homebound senior to discuss the client's will and power of attorney.

Our senior law unit had a very active year in 2022, strengthening partnerships with county leadership, including the Elder Abuse Committee in Bergen County and the Surrogate's Office in Passaic County. One of our most successful new programs was the Make-a-Will event, in which seniors met with our attorneys to begin their future planning documents. We are expanding the program to include more events in 2023.



Director of Community Relations **Anna Navatta, Esq.** meets with a potential client to review their needs for future planning documents at a Make-A-Will event in Passaic, NJ.

In 2022, we drafted a total of **384 future-planning documents** for seniors, including wills and powers of attorney. We assisted **159 seniors** and their families who were facing physical abuse or financial exploitation or both.





**5:23PM** APPELLATE WORK

Director of Litigation Gregory Diebold, right, together with Housing Unit Managing Attorney Lawrence Sindoni, above left, and Assistant Managing Attorney Soo Woo, finalize the details of an appeal that will be heard by the Superior Court of New Jersey, Appellate Division. The appeal is decided in our favor. In the case of Willow Ridge Apartments, LLC vs. Union City Rent Stabilization Board, the court rules that a 24-unit apartment building was not exempt from local rent-control ordinances—despite what the building’s owner had thought when purchasing the property—because the exemption claim had not been filed when the building was constructed. The landlord’s effort to get the New Jersey Supreme Court to review the case was opposed by us and rejected by the Court.



New Jersey landlords must do their due diligence, the court rules, to ensure that the necessary permits are in place before claiming exemption from rent-control laws—a decision that will protect low-income renters as rents continue to rise. Appeals can be time-consuming and labor-intensive, but a win like this creates real change for the communities we serve.



**6:45PM** DISASTER LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Our disaster legal assistance attorney, Ryan Spain, looks over his notes before a presentation to the public at the North Bergen Public Library, one of our community partners. Funded by Legal Services Corporation, our disaster legal assistance unit is designed to provide legal assistance to survivors of natural disasters, for issues including insurance fraud and contractor scams, unsafe or unlivable housing, and denial of disaster-related benefits.

Because the communities we serve have fewer resources, natural disasters often affect them disproportionately. We’ve handled more than 100 cases for those affected by Hurricane Ida, the vast majority of which had housing-related issues including evictions, lockouts, and repairs.

**Are you a survivor of Hurricane Ida?**

**We can help.**

- ➔ Did Hurricane Ida damage your home or belongings?
- ➔ Are you still waiting for repairs to be finished, or waiting on FEMA claims?

***We can help with these and other issues.***

**Text #disaster to 862-358-3974 to learn more.**

We share information on social media about our disaster legal assistance and our other services.

## Dear Friends and Supporters,

As I retire, I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has helped make my career in legal services so rewarding and fulfilling. I have been very fortunate to spend my time in the service of some of society's most vulnerable people. It has been a special privilege to be a part of NNJLS, an organization that every day has a direct impact on the lives of so many.

I have been extremely fortunate to have worked with so many people who are committed to that cause. NNJLS has one of the most remarkable groups of experienced attorneys of any legal services program. Similarly, the program's success would not have been possible without our dedicated group of paralegals. Our senior support staff are equally outstanding, and critical to NNJLS's success. We also have a tremendous management team, able to keep the program focused on achieving positive results for clients year after year and under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. As for our newer colleagues, it has been a real joy to see the enthusiasm and commitment they are bringing to the organization. I know that they, along with our experienced staff, will continue to have a significant impact on the communities we serve.

I am also encouraged that the program will be in extremely capable hands going forward. Our new executive director, Leah Ashe, has decades of experience as a legal services attorney, manager and colleague. She comes to the position deeply committed to NNJLS' mission and will continue to enhance the great work of the program. Our director of litigation, Greg Diebold, is among the most accomplished attorneys, not just in legal

services, but anywhere. They are all supported and encouraged by an outstanding board of directors who share the very important mission of the program.

There will be many challenges ahead, but I know that the future of the organization is bright, and everything is in place for the program to be able to meet those challenges and to thrive. I also know that NNJLS will continue to strive every day to advance the cause of equal justice for all. From the bottom of my heart, thank you all.

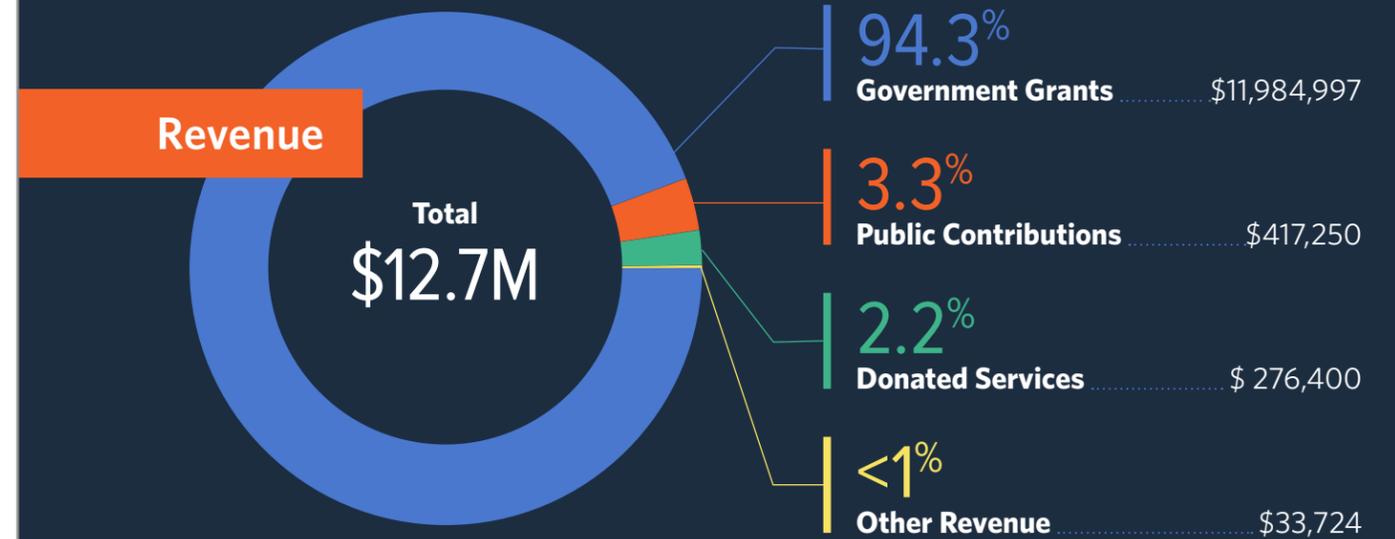
Regards,

John H. Fitzgerald, Esq.



From left to right: Jack Fitzgerald, Leah Ashe and Jack Wind

## 2022 Financial Statement



**LSC** | America's Partner  
for Equal Justice  
LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION

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.

## NNJLS PROGRAMS AND PRACTICE AREAS

### Housing

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

### Public Benefits

Unfair denial of Social Security and other benefits that support basic needs, including food stamps, disability, and unemployment.

### Family Law

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

### Consumer Protection

Bankruptcy, clearing criminal records, identity theft, and deceptive lending and sales practices.

### Federal Tax Issues

#### (Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic)

Resolving unpaid tax and other IRS issues.

### Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault

Restraining orders and other civil legal matters that affect survivors' safety and security.

### Senior Law

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

### Education

School registration, special education, and disability accommodations.

### Immigration

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

### Living with HIV and AIDS (Ryan White Project)

Legal services addressing the needs of persons living with HIV and AIDS, including preventing discrimination in housing, employment, and access to services.

### Disaster Assistance

Legal issues including contractor scams, unsafe housing, and denial of disaster-related benefits.

## EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP AND DEPARTMENTS

### EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

Leah B. Ashe, *Executive Director*

Gregory Diebold, *Director of Litigation*

Catherine Rivera, *Director of Operations*

Anna P. Navatta, *Director of Community Relations*

Elliston Panton, *Director of Finance*

Edgar Espinosa, *Deputy Director*

### Public Benefits Unit

Lisa Fennell, *Managing Attorney*

### Immigration Unit

Edgar Espinosa, *Managing Attorney*

### Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic

Rinu Cherian, *Director*

### DEPARTMENTS

#### Development

Joseph Calaceto, *Director*

Mallory C. Ware, *Manager*

#### Community Outreach and Engagement

Laura Arriaza, *Manager*

#### Communications

Lauren Puchowski, *Manager*

### LEGAL UNITS

#### Consumer Unit

Neil Fogarty, *Managing Attorney*

#### Family Unit

Dianna Fuller, *Acting Managing Attorney*

#### Housing Unit

Lawrence Sindoni, *Managing Attorney*

## 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 Law and Public Safety

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

## OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Bergen Family Center

Center for Food Action

Clifton Health Department

CUMAC - An Anti-Hunger Organization

Franciscan Community Development Center

Greater Bergen Community Action

GBCA Headstart

Hoboken Public Library

Hoboken Shelter

Hudson County Courts

Hudson Pride Center

Jersey City Free Public Library

North Bergen Free Public Library

Oasis - A Haven for Women and Children

Passaic County Ombudsman

Passaic County Surrogate's Court

Passaic County Domestic and Sexual Violence Center

Renew Life Center

Saint Matthews Lutheran Church

Triangle Park Community Center

WomenRising

## SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR PRO BONO PARTNERS

Kearny Bank

JPMorgan Chase

*We are deeply grateful to the NNJLS staff, volunteers, clients, and community partners who shared their time, stories, insights, and expertise to help create this report.*

# Board of Directors

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NORTHEAST NEW JERSEY  
**LEGAL SERVICES**

*Equal Justice for All*



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