

Legal Assistance of Western New York, Inc. ®

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We provide free legal aid to people with civil legal problems in western New York.

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Reflections on the Impact of an AmeriCorps Paralegal

Across the seven LawNY® offices, 21 AmeriCorps Paralegals provide valuable support in different ways, such as reaching out to the community or helping clients with legal issues (under the supervision of an attorney, of course!).

Below are some reflections from the AmeriCorps Paralegals in the Ithaca office. Enjoy!

Tabling at our local soup kitchen in Ithaca has been one of the most unique and enjoyable experiences I've had at LawNY®. Coming from a Korean-American background, a huge part of my culture is focused on food and sharing meals with friends and family. Food can be an expression of care and love, and is often a main way of socializing. It has been really cool to use the intimate yet casual setting of mealtime to witness a side of our clients that I don't get to see on a day to day basis when I'm sitting in the office. The side of our clients that I get to see is the side that has a passion for poetry, and the side that is playful and likes to make punny jokes. I get to see the side that is deeply thoughtful and gives me a calendar at the end of the year, and the side that cuts out newspaper articles that they think I'll enjoy reading. I get to see the side that is sweet and gentle as they hold their sleeping newborns in their arms, and the side that is frantically trying to get their five kids to stop running all around the room to sit down and eat dinner. I get to see the side of clients that offers to help clean up in the kitchen when there are not enough volunteers that day, and the side that sticks up for their friends when someone else comes by to try to put them down. I get to see the side that is deeply religious, and the side that cares for their community. I get to see the side of our clients that makes them *human*, and the side that puts a face, a family, a personality, a story, and a purpose to the work I do at LawNY® every day! ~Jane Hwang

Once a week I have the opportunity to do outreach work at Opportunities, Alternatives, and Resources (OAR) of Tompkins County. This organization assists individuals who have been incarcerated and are working to rehabilitate their lives, find housing, and gain employment. My role is to discuss with clients their legal situation, obtain an intake, and fingerprint them. When clients provide fingerprints I am able to submit an application for a rap sheet. Upon reviewing

one's rap sheet, I am able to check for errors, open cases, or cases that can potentially be sealed. Additionally, I help draft Certificates of Relief from Disabilities (CRD) to assist formerly incarcerated individuals with employment prospects.

Examining one's rap sheet and fixing the various errors that may be on it provides one with better employment opportunities and result in financial and housing security. Having this impact on one's life does not only positively benefit their life, but positively benefits future generations of their family. Dismantling barriers to employment also provides more options for individuals as opposed to the previous myopic path they may have been on.

I am fortunate enough to have the opportunity to advocate on a client's behalf when drafting CRD applications. A CRD helps eliminate the shallow perspective an employer may have when reviewing one's criminal record upon one applying for their organization. I get to show the employer a more holistic view of one's life by providing examples of rehabilitation. Examples of rehabilitation consist of educational achievements, awards, and completion of substance programs. The CRD helps show an employer that one cannot be reduced to their criminal history.
~Matt Mayers

I worked on a case for a remarkable person who was a military veteran and a single mother who was at risk of being evicted for non-payment of rent. Our client had part of her rent paid by a Section 8 voucher, and she had been having trouble understanding how much of her rent was her responsibility. Sometimes, a Section 8 servicer will send a lot of mail to voucher holders, and all those notices can confuse them. At some point there was miscommunication between our client and her Section 8 servicer. When calculating how much rent our client was supposed to pay on her own, they took income into account that she wasn't actually receiving. Because of this, our client's portion of the rent was higher than it should have been and she fell behind in her rent payments. It became such a problem that when she came to us for help she owed several thousand dollars to her landlord. I looked at financial information from the client, her landlord, and Section 8 to understand what went wrong. Using the information I had gathered, the attorney assigned to her case was able to contact her Section 8 servicer and clear up the confusion. As a result, the Section 8 servicer paid the landlord most of the back rent, leaving our client with a significantly reduced financial burden. It was a fantastic outcome for our client, and she has since paid back the remaining balance of her rent arrears. This has allowed her to avoid being evicted and preserve her voucher.

Helping this client was particularly satisfying for two reasons. I was really pleased when I heard how much money the Section 8 servicer was going to pay her landlord, because I knew she could handle getting the rest of the money. All too often we have clients that end up having the same issue over and over again because the root of the problem is not a legal issue. This client understood what had happened, and took steps to make sure it wouldn't happen again. This case also offered an excellent perspective on the value of assistance for people in tough circumstances. The Section 8 voucher meant the world to our client. For her, not having it meant that she would have lost her housing and had to stop going to school. That is devastating for a single mother of two, and would have been really hard on her kids. I'm very glad we were able to help her. ~*Andy Henry*

Printed: April 23, 2019

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