

EQUAL JUSTICE MATTERS

IMPORTANT NEWS FOR OUR CLIENTS & COMMUNITY

www.nlsa.us

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CAN'T AFFORD A LAWYER?

Help is a phone call away! Neighborhood Legal Services (NLSA) provides free civil legal services for low-income residents of Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence Counties.

Free Civil Legal Help with:

- Family Law
- Employment Law
- Protection from Abuse
- Public Benefits
- Housing Problems
- Elder Law
- Consumer & Bankruptcy Problems

Call the Toll-Free Legal Helpline @ 1-866-761-NLSA (6572)

Helpline hours are:

Monday – Friday:

9am – 12pm and

1pm – 2:30pm

Monday and Wednesday:

5pm – 8pm

**Income guidelines apply*

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FIND WHAT YOU NEED MORE EASILY— ON THE NEW NLSA WEBSITE

If you haven't been to the newly redesigned NLSA website, you'll want to visit soon and often. The new site is more user-friendly and rich in relevant content.

Clients will find the information they need easier to locate than ever before. A search box at the top of every page allows users to search the entire NLSA website for a particular item. Also, the navigation bar at the top of each page now features drop-down menus for each button on the bar.

Additional relevant material includes the new legal information videos. General videos on NLSA, its clients, and its supporters are also included on the site. The videos were created over the summer of 2010 with the assistance of Pittsburgh Filmmakers. Financial support was provided by PA Legal Aid Network and ARRA stimulus funding. More videos on other substantive areas of the law are currently in the works.

Visitors to the site will find it easy to access relevant news items. The most recent three items of interest are featured on the bottom right-hand portion of the home page. Older items continue to be available on the website based on the type of news article (program news, substantive law news, press releases, CLE's) even after they are no longer the "Latest News."

The new website provides easy access for individuals who face limited English proficiency. Visitors can select their native language from a drop-down list of available languages on the upper right-hand corner of each page. The information on the page will be translated from English into that language.

NLSA is proud to offer a redesigned website that is easier to navigate while also providing additional relevant content to users. More additions are planned, including a "share" feature on each page as well as more videos and self-help materials. Check out the website. You'll be glad you did!



TAX HELP: www.ICANEFILE.org

With April 15th fast approaching, many people are looking for help filing their taxes. The I-Can E-File online program offers an easy-to-use alternative to avoid expensive fees charged by major task preparation services. The I-Can-E-File will help you to file your federal and state taxes online. It also will help you assess your eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other tax credits.

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) was created to offset living expenses for low income working families. Depending on the number of people in an individual's household, those found eligible for the EITC could receive up to \$5,666.00 back.

Benefits of using I-Can E-File to do your taxes this year include:

- Access I-Can E-File from any computer with an internet connection (www.icanefile.org)
- Receive this service for 100% free
- Assess your eligibility for Earned Income Tax Credit and other tax credits

Senior citizens who do not have access to a computer can call the AARP number to find a location that can assist with E-Filing: 888-227-7669.

If your family does not have resources to use I-Can E-File, you can visit a tax preparation site where you can get your taxes done for free by IRS-certified volunteers. Call the IRS at 1-800-829-1040 to locate the site nearest you.

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HOW TO...

Get help with credit:

- **Advantage/Consumer Credit Counseling Services** provides free financial education and credit/debt assessment: www.advantagecccs.org; 866-699-2227; 412-390-1300
- **Garfield Jubilee Association** provides help with anti-predatory lending, budgeting, credit repair, foreclosure prevention, Homeowners Emergency Mortgage Assistance program, monthly workshops: www.garfieldjubilee.org; 412-665-5209
- **NeighborWorks of Western PA** provides homeownership and credit counseling, mortgage foreclosure prevention services, financial education: www.nwwpa.org; 412-281-9773

Check your credit reports:

Get a free credit report each year from each of the three major credit bureaus (Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion) at www.annualcreditreport.com.

Do not use any other website to get your free reports.

Get information to dispute inaccurate information and improve your credit:

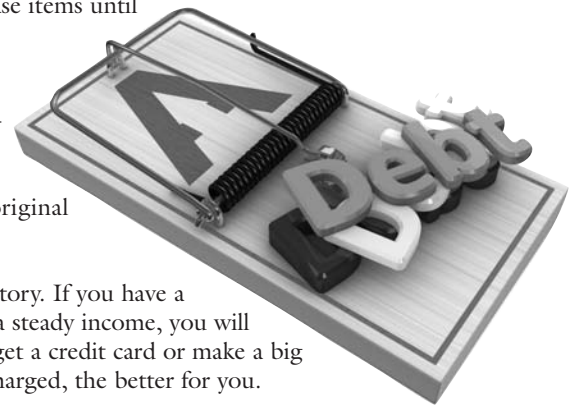
- **U.S. Government's Federal Trade Commission** website: www.ftc.gov.

CREDIT: THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Using credit to make an important purchase such as a car or a house makes sense, but credit can also be dangerous. Any time you use credit to buy things you cannot afford, you could hurt yourself financially. Consider waiting to purchase items until you have saved the necessary amount.

What does credit cost you?

Credit is an expensive way to buy anything—because when you buy something on credit, you pay interest on the debt until you pay it off. You end up paying a lot more than the original purchase price.



How much you pay depends on your credit history. If you have a good record of making payments on time and a steady income, you will be given a lower interest rate when you try to get a credit card or make a big purchase. The lower the interest rate you are charged, the better for you.

For example: If you buy a house and take out a 30 year, fixed-rate mortgage for \$100,000.00, the interest over a 30-year period adds up to a great deal of money.

1. If you are charged 6% interest on the mortgage, your monthly payments will be \$600.00. At 6% interest, that \$100,000 loan will cost you \$216,000.00 over 30 years.
2. If you are charged 9% interest, your monthly payments will be \$805.00. At 9% interest, that \$100,000 loan will cost you \$289,800.00 to pay back.

Over thirty years, a person charged 9% will pay \$73,800.00 more for that same house just because the interest rate was 3% higher due to a poor credit rating!

Interest on a credit card works the same way, so it is a bad idea to run up a big credit card bill. The interest rates on credit cards are usually very high, which makes the items you charge to your card cost you much more than you might expect.

It is always expensive to use credit cards unless you pay off your entire bill every month. If you have an outstanding balance, how you repay your credit card bill makes a big difference in how much the credit will cost you.

For example: If you have a balance of \$5,000.00 and your credit card has an 18% interest rate:

1. If you pay \$200.00 every month, it will take you 32 months to pay off the balance, and you will pay a total of \$1,313.96 in interest;
- but even worse---
2. If you make only the minimum payment each month (calculated as 4% of the balance due, plus interest) then it will take you 134 months to pay off the bill. You will pay a total of \$2,873.50 in interest on top of the actual bill of \$5,000.00!

If your credit is good—keep it that way. You can see what a difference good credit makes! When you make purchases on credit, be sure to make payments on time—every month. Never give in to the temptation to use credit to live beyond your means.

WHAT IS NLSA?

Neighborhood Legal Services Association (NLSA) is a private, nonprofit corporation created to provide high-quality, free legal services to low-income individuals, the elderly and victims of domestic violence of Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, and Lawrence counties.

NLSA represents clients in many ways, depending on the type of legal problem. For certain problems, we provide an attorney. For other problems, we provide telephone advice and/or a reduced fee referral to a private attorney who will provide representation at a reduced rate. We also have special grants to help specific populations such as the elderly.

To inquire about our services, please call 1-866-761-6572.

DOES CREDIT CARD DEBT LEAD TO BANKRUPTCY OR JAIL?



Contrary to popular belief, you *cannot* go to jail for failure to pay a credit card debt. If you do not voluntarily pay, the credit card company has to sue you in civil court (not criminal court) if it wants to force you to pay the debt. The lawsuit may be filed at the magisterial district court or at the Court of Common Pleas in the county. You may not recognize the name of the company suing you because the credit card company may have sold the debt to another company.

Generally whether you should file for bankruptcy varies with your particular circumstances. Only consider bankruptcy as a last resort option. The credit card company or debt buyer must sue and obtain a judgment before it can force you to pay. If you learn that the company is trying to collect a judgment, you certainly should consult an attorney immediately.

You can only file a Chapter 7 bankruptcy -- the kind that erases unsecured debt like credit card debt -- and obtain a discharge of the debt once every eight years. It also affects your credit record. If you are considering filing for bankruptcy, you should consult an attorney.

See the sidebar on page 2 for resources to help with credit advice.



SAVE THE DATE!

NLSA is participating in the Highmark Walk for a Healthy Community presented by Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield on Saturday, May 21, 2011 at Heinz Field.

The Highmark Walk is a fundraiser that benefits local health and human service agencies in the Western Pennsylvania, including NLSA!

Mark Saturday, May 21, 2011 on your calendar, and start gathering friends, family members, neighbors and co-workers to join you in walking to ensure a healthier community.

For more information or to register, visit www.walkforahealthycommunity.org. Be sure to select NLSA!

LOCAL NLSA OFFICES

ALLEGHENY COUNTY

928 Penn Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-3799
Telephone: 412-255-6700

BEAVER COUNTY

Stone Point Landing, Suite 204A
500 Market Street
Bridgewater, PA 15009
Telephone: 724-378-0595

BUTLER COUNTY

Holly Pointe, Suite 301
220 South Main Street
Butler, PA 16001-5973
Telephone: 724-282-3888

LAWRENCE COUNTY

125 East North Street
Suite 329 – Temple Building
New Castle, PA 16101-3751
Telephone: 724-658-2677

NLSA'S MISSION

Our mission is to meet the civil legal needs of the poor and vulnerable in our community through effective legal representation and education.

REMEMBER: The law often changes. Each case is different. This newsletter is meant to give you general legal information and does not constitute specific legal advice. Please use the information in this newsletter carefully because it may not accurately reflect any changes in the law that occurred after its initial publication. If you need legal help, please immediately contact our helpline (1-866-761-6572) or your local Bar Association's lawyer referral service.



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Neighborhood Legal Services Association

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CASE IN POINT

Actual Client Stories

WHO:

Willa

TOPIC:

Predatory Lending

At age 86 and legally blind, Willa risked losing her home of 60 years in a foreclosure proceeding. Her monthly payments were substantially more than her monthly Social Security benefit. This untenable situation was created when a lender approached the elderly woman, who owned her home free and clear. The lender promised to make repairs in exchange for placing a lien on the property. Willa's home was then mortgaged for triple its market value and the promised repairs were never started.

NLSA successfully defended against the Mortgage Foreclosure Complaint asking for damages against the predatory lender. A negotiated settlement was reached, requiring the lender to cancel the contract and the mortgage. The Complaint was withdrawn and Willa again owns her home debt free.

Equal Justice Matters is a free publication of NLSA and is distributed electronically three times a year. To continue to receive this publication (in electronic form), please visit www.nlsa.us and complete the Sign-Up box for our e-mail newsletter or e-mail enews@nlsa.us. Please include your name and email address.

CLIENT HAPPENINGS

Neighborhood Legal Services Association offers a Debt Advice Clinic two evenings a month from 5:30 to 8:00 at the Pittsburgh office, 928 Penn Avenue.

The purpose of the clinic is to assist clients in evaluating the legal aspects of their financial situation and to help them determine if filing a bankruptcy is in their best interest.

The clinic begins at 5:30 with a brief introductory presentation in which the differences between a Chapter 7 and a Chapter 13 bankruptcy are explained, and then a few brief financial case studies are presented. Each client is then seen individually by an experienced bankruptcy attorney, either an NLSA staff attorney or a volunteer private attorney.

If the attorney determines that the client has a non-emergency situation, the client is then offered a Reduced Fee Certificate which he or she can use to contact an attorney listed on the certificate. If the attorney believes that the situation is an emergency, then the client will be represented by NLSA or will be referred to a private attorney for pro bono representation.

The clinic also provides the clients with access to numerous legal brochures on consumer issues.

Anyone interested in attending the clinic should contact the intake unit at 412-255-6700 to pre-register. **The clinic does not take walk-ins, you must make an appointment.**



The following NLSA attorneys and staff have contributed to the content and publication of the newsletter: Jeffrey Braun, Esq., Amy Carpenter, Esq., Jeffrey Ditzis, Pamela Dalton-Arlotti, Esq., Christine Kirby Kathleen Parke, Phyllis Stevens, Daniel Vittek, Esq.



Neighborhood Legal Services Association

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