

EQUAL JUSTICE MATTERS

IMPORTANT NEWS FOR OUR CLIENTS & COMMUNITY

www.nlsa.us

May 2010 | Volume 1 | Issue 1

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*

CONTENTS

- 1 Census 2010
- 2 Employment Law & You Client Involvement
- 3 What is NLSA? PALawHelp.org
- 4 Case In Point Neighborhood Happenings

next issue... August 2010



APPEALING FOR JUSTICE

As Executive Director of the Neighborhood Legal Services Association (NLSA), it is my great pleasure to introduce the first issue of **Equal Justice Matters**, a newsletter written for you, our clients. I am sure many of our friends and colleagues in the human services arena, as well as members of the general public, will find the newsletter to be a valuable resource for information.

Equal justice for all persons regardless of economic status is a basic concept and right in our system of justice. Sadly, however, it is an unrealized right. Today, we still find the majority of America's poor unable to have legal representation when faced with civil legal issues. While it is our mission to help all that we can, our services, unfortunately, cannot reach everyone who is entitled to them. Part of our goal in creating this newsletter is to provide you with information that you can use to educate

yourselves and others as to legal issues that may affect your lives. Knowledge is the first step in creating an equal and fair environment in which we can all succeed.

In the past 40 years in which I have been a part of NLSA, we have helped hundreds of thousands of low-income individuals in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence Counties. Our lawyers provide civil legal assistance to the poor and vulnerable. They are highly qualified attorneys who are deeply committed to the practice of poverty law and the principle of equal access to justice for rich and poor alike. We help the individual, which in turn helps the community at large.

I urge you to take advantage of the information contained in **Equal Justice Matters** as well as our services. There is a wealth of knowledge available at your fingertips; NLSA's goal is to make finding it a little more manageable.

Robert V. Racunas

Robert V. Racunas
Executive Director

CENSUS 2010 | WHY IT MATTERS



The information collected through the census is the basis for distributing \$400 billion in federal funds. This money is used for things like building senior centers, hospitals, job training centers, schools and funding for public-works projects. It also determines the number of seats Pennsylvania has in the U.S. House of Representatives. Most importantly, census counts determines funding for organizations like ours...which will have a direct effect on our ability to serve you!

The 10 question form takes about 10 minutes to fill out. It contains basic questions asking your name, age, race and gender. Answers to the questions remain confidential and will only be used for the Census. The form is mailed to your home and even comes with a postage-paid envelope to return your responses free of charge. You cannot fill out a census form online.

The census is taken once every 10 years. Please take the time to complete your form. Without an accurate count, Pennsylvania will not get its fair share. After all, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain from it.



Funded, in part, by the Commonwealth and through a contract with the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). The official registration and financial information of Neighborhood Legal Services Association may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement. Federal regulations applying to NLSA require that we notify all donors that no funds can be expended by NLSA for any activity prohibited under P.L. 104-134 or otherwise prohibited by 45 C.F.R. § 1600 et seq.

MAY 2010

EMPLOYMENT LAW AND YOU

Neighborhood Legal Services Association has had a long history of representing clients with unemployment compensation issues. However, limits on staff time and funding made it almost impossible to provide assistance in other areas of employment law. In the past decade, the need of low-income residents for representation in all areas has grown dramatically.

Due to this demand, NLSA and its partners began the Pennsylvania Employment Project in 2006. The project was developed to expand the area of legal representation and advice for clients who have more specific employment issues. Today, the areas NLSA deals with can be broken down into three main components:

1) Barriers to Employment

- expungement of arrest records
- pardon process
- expungement of unsubstantiated child abuse allegations
- driver's license suspensions
- non-compete agreements

2) Job Preservation

- family and medical leave
- employment discrimination
- workers rights

3) Preserving/Obtaining Income Benefits

- unemployment compensation
- wage claims
- pensions
- employer provided disability benefits
- child support garnishment
- at will discharges
- misclassification as an independent contractor

The biggest issue NLSA sees currently is criminal records preventing employment. There are many employers that are contracting with private companies to run criminal background checks on all applicants for jobs. The private companies are then not always using the best information or resource to research an individual's criminal record. This results in the private companies supplying possible employers with incorrect criminal record information that may prevent that individual from getting a job with that employer.

Our office works to help clients clean up criminal records and be informed as to what is appearing on their criminal records so they are

TIPS ABOUT EMPLOYMENT

1. Obtain your Pennsylvania State Police report (\$10 fee) to be sure what is appearing on your criminal record.
2. Be sure not to lie or misrepresent yourself on a job application - you can be fired for it and denied unemployment compensation benefits!
3. If you are having problems in the workplace, document everything. If there are disciplinary actions taken against you, ask for copies.
4. Keep track of the time that you worked and compare it against your pay stubs to be sure that you are being paid properly.

ready to explain it to the employer or correct any inaccurate information that a private company has supplied to the employer.

The staff at NLSA continually works hard to expand the amount of help it can give to you in regards to employment law. The economy is not at its best and times are tough for many. If you have questions about an employment situation in your life, please call our helpline (1-866-761-6572) or utilize the links and tools included throughout this newsletter.

CLIENT INVOLVEMENT

Client involvement is important to the delivery of quality legal services to the communities we serve. To help us, 13 client representatives sit on NLSA's 39-member Board of Directors. Our client board members also run meetings of the Central Clients' Council and the Beaver County Clients' Council. In turn, these organizations provide outreach to and input from the larger client community, which helps NLSA to identify broader problems, fulfill needs and effectively use resources.

If you are interested in becoming a client board member or want to get involved with our client advisory councils, please contact Sharon at 412-255-6700 ext. 6101.

HOW TO ...

- 1) **File for unemployment compensation:** Go to www.dli.state.pa.us to begin an application or call toll-free at 1-888-255-4728.
- 2) **File a wage complaint:** Go to www.dli.state.pa.us to file an application on-line or to print out an application and mail it in.
- 3) **File a charge for employment discrimination:** Go to www.eeoc.gov for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a federal agency, or www.phrc.state.pa.us for the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, a state agency.

CAREER RESOURCES

- 1) **CareerLink** - www.cwds.state.pa.us
- 2) **Mon Valley Initiative** - www.monvalleyinitiative.com
- 3) **Goodwill Industries** - www.goodwillswpa.org
- 4) **Brashear Association** - www.brashearassociation.org

WHAT IS NLSA?

Neighborhood Legal Services Association (NLSA) is a private, nonprofit corporation created to provide high quality, free civil 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 upon the type of legal problem. The more serious problems will result in an NLSA attorney providing representation. Less serious matters will result in the client only getting advice and/or a referral to a private attorney who may provide the representation at a reduced rate. This is because we simply do not have enough attorneys to provide everyone with an attorney. We have to set priorities...sort of like emergency rooms which practice triage when the need outweighs the capacity of the organization.

We provide an attorney in Protection From Abuse cases; evictions from public/subsidized housing; some private housing evictions; tax sales of homes; mortgage foreclosure; wage claims; expungements; child custody where the

child has been snatched or the custodial parent has been sued by the non-custodial parent for custody; SSI denials; unemployment compensation; public benefit denials (Medicaid/TANF/GA/Food Stamps); utility terminations; bankruptcy to protect a residence or stop a utility termination; and executions on essential personal property.

If you do not have one of these problems, you may get telephone advice and/or a reduced fee referral to a private attorney who will provide representation at a reduced rate. These cases include support; divorce; other custody/visitation matters; non-emergency bankruptcies; debt collection matters; and general landlord tenant matters involving security deposits or maintenance issues.

We also have a few special grants to help specific populations. Some of these include: the elderly (60+) at Senior Centers in Allegheny County, to counsel folks in danger of foreclosure, and to represent children in guardianship proceedings in Beaver County.

To start using our services, please call 1-866-761-6572.

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

FIND IT ON PALawHELP.ORG

PALawHELP.org is a free, easy-to-use web site that contains accurate and helpful legal information on the following subject areas: Consumer, Children and Family, Disability, Education, Elder Law, Employment, Health Law, Housing and Shelter, Immigration, Migrant Issues, Public Benefits, and Veterans and Military. When you click on one of these topics from the homepage, a variety of sub-topics pop up, from which you can pick the one that best fits what you are looking for. Once you click on the appropriate sub-topic, you are directed to a screen that gives you general information, specific news articles, and links to the appropriate government agency's web site. You can even find information on free legal aid programs, legal service providers, information about your legal rights, legal education and self help information, and information about and links to social services and government agencies.

The information contained on this web site is meant as a self-help tool. The first step in getting an issue resolved is educating yourself on the issue. The web site is very user friendly, but in the event you encounter difficulty, there is a link that directs you to a short video which explains how to use PALawHELP.org

www.palawhelp.org

TOPIC:

Unemployment

CLICK ON:

*Public Benefits or
Employment*

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.

MAY 2010



CASE IN POINT

Actual Client Stories

WHO:

Deborah

TOPIC:

Unemployment & Public Benefits

Deborah was denied Supplemental Security Income (SSI) after a series of strokes left her unable to continue her career as a hair stylist. The denial was based on the court's expectation that her condition would improve enough for her to go back to work. Deborah attempted to return to her workplace in some capacity; however she was unable to stand or sit for any length of time and she could no longer read, write or even recall phone messages.

She tried unsuccessfully to appeal the SSI decision on her own, then turned to NLSA. While Deborah survived for 18 months on public assistance and help from friends and family, NLSA gathered medical evidence establishing her right to benefits designed for low-income people who cannot work due to disability. At the appeal hearing, the judge agreed that Deborah qualified for SSI and ordered benefits to be paid retroactively. That modest income enabled her to shift some of the financial responsibility from her family to herself.

NEIGHBORHOOD HAPPENINGS

- There is a free program being offered by **Goodwill** that will help prepare for the GED test. This program provides preparation for all parts of the test and is offered in the morning, afternoon and evening. If you or someone you know needs help preparing for the GED and would like to enroll in these classes please contact Jay at (412)390-2263.
- Are you, or is somebody you know interested in the construction field? **Minority and Women Educational Labor Agency (MWELA)** is designed to help increase your chances for being selected to the apprenticeship program of your choice. If you are interested, call MWELA at 412-697-2655 or visit their website at www.mwela.net to get started. MWELA is a no cost program.
- **Dress for Success** promotes the economic independence of disadvantaged women by providing professional attire, a network of support and the career development tools to help women thrive in work and in life. Professional Women's Group (PWG) is the first and only national initiative of its kind, focused on specific workshops and networking as a job retention and career development tool for women re-entering the workforce. Career Center offers services and resources along every single step of the job search process. This includes resume- and cover letter-writing instruction, job search assistance, an Internet-accessible computer lab and mock interview simulations. For more information, to schedule an appointment or to sign up for a workshop, contact Dress for Success Pittsburgh at (412) 201-4204 or visit their website at www.dressforsuccesspgh.org

Equal Justice Matters is a free publication of NLSA and is distributed electronically each quarter. 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.



Neighborhood Legal Services Association

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