New Jersey Legal Services Programs

Legal Services of New Jersey
100 Metroplex Drive, Suite 402
P.O. Box 1357
Edison, NJ 08818-1357
Melville D. Miller, Jr., President

Central Jersey Legal Services
Covering Mercer, Middlesex, and Union counties
317 George Street, Suite 201
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
(732) 249-7600
Other offices: Perth Amboy, Trenton, Elizabeth
Executive Director: Janice Chapin

Essex-Newark Legal Services
Covering Essex County
5 Commerce Street, 2nd Floor
Newark, New Jersey 07102
(973) 624-4500
Director: Felipe Chavana

Legal Services of Northwest Jersey
Covering Hunterdon, Morris, Somerset, Sussex, and Warren counties
34 West Main Street, Suite 301
Somerville, NJ 08876
(908) 231-0840
Other offices: Flemington, Morristown, Belvidere, Newton
Executive Director: Diane K. Smith

Northeast New Jersey Legal Services
Covering Bergen, Hudson, and Passaic counties
574 Summit Avenue, 3rd Floor
Jersey City, NJ 07306-2797
(201) 792-6363
Other offices: Hackensack, Paterson
Director: John H. Fitzgerald

South Jersey Legal Services
Covering Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Ocean, Monmouth, and Salem counties
745 Market Street
Camden, NJ 08102
(856) 964-2010
Other offices: Atlantic City, Cape May Court House, Freehold, Mt. Holly, Toms River, Vineland, and Woodbury
Executive Director: Douglas E. Gershuny

The New Jersey Legal Services System at a Glance

Mission—Providing Essential Legal Aid

LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAMS are the primary vehicle by which society provides free legal assistance in civil matters to people who cannot afford the cost of legal representation. Legal Services focuses its work on the most pressing and important legal needs of low-income people—essential legal aid. The mission is to secure the greatest possible measure of substantive and procedural justice for its clients, with a special emphasis on expanding economic opportunity for those in poverty.

Services are provided in response to a broad range of civil legal problems. While the types of cases handled vary from county to county, depending upon local needs and priorities, the range of percentages for New Jersey's Legal Services programs are as follows (actual statewide averages for 2012 are in parentheses):

Housing (principally tenancy matters)	17-40%	(28.3%)
Family (divorce, separation, support, and custody matters)	6-25%	(18.9%)
Consumer (bankruptcy, collection cases, warranties, unfair sales practices, and public utilities)	12-28%	(17.3%)
Income Maintenance (Social Security, Work First New Jersey, SSI, Food Stamps, and other such programs)	12-26%	(20.4%)

Other cases (15.1%) include education, health, employment, juvenile matters, and individual rights.

Legal Services programs offer a full range of legal assistance, from brief advice and counseling to litigation. Maximizing scarce resources, Legal Services programs are able to resolve four out of five cases without litigation. Since its inception in New Jersey in 1966, the Legal Services system has represented more than 2 million people, with a strong record of quality work and superb results.

The Overwhelming Need for Legal Services

For clients to be served through the use of Legal Services Corporation funds, strict federal income eligibility guidelines, set by law at a maximum of 125 percent of the federal Department of Health and Human Services poverty levels, are followed. (For example, the federal poverty threshold for a family of three—a single parent and two children under 18—is $19,530.) Two other major funding sources cap eligibility at 200% of the federal standard. Other funding sources stipulate their own specific eligibility guidelines.

Census data indicates that more than 2 million people in New Jersey—approaching one out of every four in the state—have incomes at a level that qualifies them for Legal Services' help. According to the most recent study, more than 460,000 low-income adults in New Jersey have at least one serious civil legal problem each year. Of these, fewer than one in six receive help from a lawyer. There is one private attorney in New Jersey for every 200 members of the general population, excluding those eligible for Legal Services. By contrast, at current funding there is only one Legal Services lawyer for every 11,000 people eligible for services!

Funding Legal Services in New Jersey

The major sources of funding for Legal Services in New Jersey are an appropriation from the state and the Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) Fund, which have experienced major reductions since 2008. IOLTA has dropped from a high of more than $40 million to less than $7 million annually. The state appropriation has been cut from a high of $29.6 million in FY2009 and FY2010 to $14.9 million in FY2012 and FY2013. Federal funding has declined as well, from $7.6 million in 2010 to $6.0 million currently. Overall, Legal Services funding in New Jersey has declined from $72 million in 2008 to just over $40 million in 2012. The funding cuts have resulted in the loss of more than 340 staff members statewide and a decline in the number of new cases opened, from a high of 69,313 in 2009 to 49,835 in 2012.

In addition to public funding, major efforts are made each year to secure private support from law firms, corporations, and individuals, principally through the Campaign for Justice, as well as from foundations.

The Legal Services System in New Jersey

New Jersey has six Legal Services corporations: five regional corporations, which provide direct services to clients in all 21 counties through 21 local offices, and Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), the statewide organization that coordinates the system. Each regional program is a separate not-for-profit corporation governed by a board of trustees, which includes members of the local bar association as well as representatives of the eligible client population.

LSNJ ties these regional program efforts together, providing information, training, legal and administrative coordination, technical assistance, and other support. LSNJ also provides representation to clients in matters of broad or statewide significance, and through special projects initiated in response to particular, emerging needs of the low-income population. Current special projects at LSNJ include:

- **LSNJLAW℠**, Legal Services of New Jersey's statewide legal hotline, provides brief service, advice, and referral over the telephone. By dialing our toll-free number, 1-888-LSNJ-LAW, clients can speak with attorneys about a range of civil legal issues. Clients may also complete the hotline's online intake form at ***www.lsnjlawhotline.org***, and hotline staff will contact clients within two business days.
- The **Consumer Protection** and **Foreclosure Defense Projects** represent victims of improper sales and lending practices. As part of a comprehensive plan to provide assistance to homeowners facing foreclosure, LSNJ established the Legal Services of New Jersey Mortgage Foreclosure Message Information System to provide information on New Jersey's mortgage foreclosure counseling and mediation program.
- The **Domestic Violence Representation Project** provides representation to victims of domestic violence who seek restraining orders and in matters that arise after a final restraining order has been obtained, and that relate to the care or protection of children.
- The **Education Representation Project** provides advice and representation to clients in certain education cases.
- The **Family Representation Project** provides social worker services and legal advice and representation to low-income parents involved in disputes with the Division of Youth and Family Services, to ensure that a maximum effort is being made to keep families together.

- The **Health Care Access Project®** provides information, advice, referral, advocacy, and representation to low-income people who need help securing medical services from New Jersey's complex health care system.
- The **Immigration Representation Project** provides legal representation to immigrants, especially those seeking asylum, battered women self-petitioning for lawful permanent resident status, and legal permanent residents who must clear their records to open the way to naturalization.

- The **Legal Assistance to Medical Patients Project℠**, in place at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center and Trinitas Regional Medical Center in Elizabeth, provides legal assistance to low-income patients in the health care setting and trains medical staff to enable them to identify legal barriers to patients' health and make appropriate referrals to the project.
- The **Prisoner Reentry Project** provides advice and representation to prisoners preparing to reenter society, and those who have been released, who face civil legal barriers related to their incarceration.
- The **Senior Citizen Legal Representation Project** provides information, advice, referral, advocacy, and legal representation to lower-income people 60 years of age and older, in areas such as long-term care, simple estate planning, elder financial abuse, and Medicaid/Medicare.
- The **General Representation Unit** accepts a number of clients who cannot otherwise be assisted by regional Legal Services programs due to funding source and other resource limitations.
- The **SSI Project** represents recipients of General Assistance or Temporary Aid to Needy Families who seek federal SSI benefits because of a long-term physical condition.
- The **Taxpayer Legal Assistance Project** provides information, advice, and legal representation in tax matters to low-income taxpayers.
- The **Veterans Legal Assistance Project** provides advice and legal representation to eligible low-income military veterans. VLAP can help veterans presenting claims to the Department of Veterans Affairs in disability and compensation claims. The project does not assist veterans seeking discharge upgrades.
- The **Workers Legal Rights** and **Farmworker Projects** provide advice and representation to a growing number of low-income workers whose rights have been violated by their employers.

LSNJ is also home to the **Poverty Research Institute**, a research and advocacy project that develops and updates information on the extent and effects of poverty in New Jersey.

Extending the Reach and Effectiveness of Legal Services in New Jersey

New Jersey's Legal Services system achieves significant efficiencies in the sharing of resources through the advanced use of technology. The toll-free hotline is buttressed by a new generation of comprehensive legal education and *pro se* materials, to enable people to resolve issues on their own whenever feasible. This material augments LSNJ's community legal education newsletter, *Looking Out For Your Legal Rights®*, distributed in print primarily through the regional Legal Services offices, and extensive manuals covering domestic violence, tenancy law, divorce, expungement, charity care, termination of parental rights, child abuse and neglect, and lead paint poisoning. LSNJ staff have also authored *You and the Law in New Jersey*, a comprehensive book published by Rutgers University Press. These publications are available to the public on the LSNJ website, ***www.LSNJ.org***. LSNJ also has a website, ***www.LSNJLAW.org***, which provides legal information, forms, publications, resource directories, and links to other sources of information and help. It currently averages more than 25,000 visits per week.

Many New Jersey attorneys make a significant effort to help by accepting referrals of Legal Services cases on a completely voluntary *pro bono* basis. In addition, several corporations have established cooperating *pro bono* programs within their general counsel staff, augmenting the efforts of more than 2,700 private lawyers who have made themselves available to take *pro bono* cases on referral from Legal Services. To promote and facilitate the enrollment of *pro bono* attorneys with Legal Services, LSNJ has established ***www.PROBONONJ.org***. Nearly 2,000 cases in 2012 were handled by volunteer private attorneys on a *pro bono* basis.