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**AS NEW JERSEY LEGAL SERVICES PREPARES FOR ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY,
ONE CLIENT’S STORY DEPICTS HOW THE ORGANIZATION HAS HELPED SOME
8 MILLION POOR PEOPLE WITH LEGAL PROBLEMS OVER THE YEARS**

EDISON —Laura’s story is a microcosm of the millions of poor people with serious civil legal problems who have turned for help to New Jersey Legal Services. For Laura, it took just two harrowing weeks into her marriage to a man she met on a dating website before the physical and mental abuse and countless lies began, “I was not allowed to talk to my family, friends,” Laura says, “Basically every aspect of my life was controlled.”

Help came. A Legal Services attorney was able to obtain a domestic violence restraining order, allowing Laura the peace of mind to start putting her life back together. She saw her Legal Services attorney as a virtual godsend. “I owe everything to her. I didn’t know where to go or who to turn to.”

What befell Laura and how she was able to get free assistance is among more than 2.4 million cases involving nearly eight million clients with varying and often-debilitating civil legal problems Legal Services has handled in the last half century. That and other achievements of the non-profit organization will be at the center of a Dec. 7 commemorative dinner in New Brunswick highlighting Legal Services 50th anniversary and its half century of providing access to justice for poor people, including hundreds of thousands children, unable to afford private lawyers.

Several hundred Legal Services staffers, law firms, businesses and other supporters and well-wishers of Legal Services are expected to attend the 6 p. m. Dec. 7 gathering at the Hyatt Regency in New Brunswick. Reservations, more details and information about potential sponsorships may be made by calling 732 529-8212 or emailing LSNJ50@lsnj.org. Sponsors helping to defray the cost of the event already include Merck and the law firms of Riker Danzig and Ballard Spahr.

Two of New Jersey’s most recognized judicial luminaries — Chief Justice Stuart J. Rabner and former Chief Justice Deborah T. Poritz — will be among the speakers paying tribute

to Legal Services, which began operations in the Garden State in 1966 and quickly emerged as the primary vehicle in the state for providing free civil legal help to disadvantaged individuals and families who could not otherwise afford it.

The 50th anniversary commemoration — and other anniversary-marking events to follow during the next year — is not just a rollcall of all Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) and its five regional programs, with offices in all 21 counties, have done since the non-profit network became a fixture in the Garden State five decades ago. Rather, says LSNJ President Melville D. Miller Jr., the event is an important public opportunity to underscore the ever-increasing “legal justice gap” between the legal needs every year of tens of thousands impoverished New Jerseyans and the enormous black hole of such free services available to them.

Says Miller, “Regardless of their financial plight, it is absolutely necessary in a just society for so many people in real poverty in our state to have the same access to the halls of justice as all other citizens.”

LSNJ and the regional programs handle close to 50,000 cases annually, but that, Miller notes, amounts to only about six percent of the total civil legal problems facing the poor. These include such critical matters as foreclosures, evictions, spousal abuse, consumer problems, workplace issues, and eligibility for government safety net programs.

He adds, “Put simply. Legal Services stands as the shield for the poor against homelessness, family break-ups, unchecked hunger, physical safety and other conditions that the majority of New Jerseyans take for granted.”