



IN THE BALANCE

Grand Opening Ceremonies in Putnam

On Monday, November 10, 2003, Westchester/Putnam Legal Services, soon to be known as Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, held their official grand opening ceremonies for its new office in Putnam County. With the assistance of a grant from the Violence Against Women Act, those in need in Putnam County now have access to comprehensive civil legal services to deal with issues involving domestic violence.

In the short time that we have been in operation, attorneys Antonia Godsey, Christal Camaj and managing attorney Jacqueline Frost have already represented over 100 women in the Putnam County courts. Physical, verbal, mental and financial abuse are just a few of the issues that are tackled by our advocates. The efforts of these dedicated attorneys have resulted in numerous victories for battered women and their children.

Elected, local and county, officials praised the work of our advocates stating that it is a much needed service in the county. We hope to obtain state and county funding to maintain these services in the future.
Rosalie Cicogna, Director of Administration

A lawyer has an obligation to render public interest and pro bono legal service. A lawyer may fulfill this responsibility by providing professional services at no fee or at a reduced fee to individuals of limited financial means or to public service or charitable groups or organizations, by participating in programs and organizations specifically designed to increase the availability of legal services. In addition, lawyers or law firms are encouraged to supplement this responsibility through the financial and other support of organizations that provide legal services to persons of limited means.
-from the New York State Lawyers Code of Professional Responsibility



L. to R. Alan Steiner, Board Member, LSHV, Hon. Robert Pozzi, Supervisor-elect, Town of Carmel, Senator Vincent Leibell, NY State Senate, Frank DelCampo, Assistant County Executive, Barbara Finkelstein, Esq., Executive Director, W/PLS



Barbara Finkelstein, Executive Director

This new year brings major changes at Westchester/Putnam Legal Services. The most exciting change is the expansion of the organization and our planned name change. Within the coming months WPLS will change its' name to Legal Services of the Hudson Valley as we become the only civil legal services provider in Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess, Orange, Ulster and Sullivan Counties. Our expansion is part of a strategic restructuring of federally funded civil legal services programs in New York State to establish "State Justice Communities." WPLS will provide services to the Hudson Valley through a network of offices located in White Plains, Yonkers, Mahopac, Poughkeepsie, Newburgh and Kingston. Strong administrative support will be centrally located in White Plains, and operational improvements such as a six-county "800" number for centralized client access, integrated technology, and enhanced coordination of litigation and supervision will improve services to all clients. When people cannot afford legal advice or representation, they risk their rights and well being. WPLS plans to ensure that access to justice and concrete resolution of problems are increased as a result of this reorganization.

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

During 2003, WPLS handled 8, 513 cases that benefited over 20,000 people. Our assistance helps those who cannot afford competent civil legal representation when personal and family emergencies occur. We ensure that families and elderly individuals are not wrongly evicted resulting in their homelessness. We make sure that women and children do not remain in life threatening domestic violence situations, that children obtain the educational services they need to learn and develop, and that disabled adults receive financial and health benefits to which they are entitled.

With over 35 years of experience providing free, high quality legal services WPLS prevents greater social problems like homelessness, child neglect and domestic violence. We hope we can count on all those who read this newsletter to help us build strong communities throughout the Hudson Valley by ensuring that our most at-risk neighbors are guaranteed quality civil representation.

Peace to all and best wishes for a happy holiday season and New Year from all of us at WPLS.

Barbara Finkelstein, Executive Director

Spotlight on Jill Bradshaw-Soto

Score two for W/PLS' Family Law Unit. Jill Bradshaw-Soto scored big with two successful cases. The first involved children whose parents were tragically killed in a house fire in Yonkers. Putting her proficient advocacy talents into high gear, Jill, a seasoned attorney, was able to prevent both children, who are 1 and 3 years old, from going into foster care. The children have been placed with relatives and are thriving.

The second case involved the children of a woman who were abducted by their father. The mother filed a habeas corpus petition and obtained an order for the children to be returned. However, being unable to locate the children or the father, she was unable to have the orders served. Diligent and persistent investigation by Jill discovered that the school in Yonkers, where the children were enrolled, sent their records to a school down south, without the mother's permission.

Jill immediately contacted Legal Services in North Carolina, explained the problem and faxed the necessary documents. They took the case and obtained a district court order to take the children directly out of school without involvement of the father. Mother and children returned safely to New York without incident.

Jill has been a staff attorney since March 1998 and has represented clients in areas of housing, disabilities, government benefits, family law and other areas of general practice.



Jill Bradshaw-Soto, Esq., Managing Attorney, Yonkers

Jill is a graduate of the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York. She received her Juris Doctor Degree in June 1992 and is a recipient of a Ford Foundation Fellowship.

A dedicated legal services attorney, Jill is active in many community activities. She has conducted numerous trainings at various community agencies informing residents of their rights as well as Pro Bono training on issues involving child support so that individuals are able to represent themselves in court.

Jill will now take over the reigns of the Yonkers office as managing attorney while Lewis Creekmore, the former managing attorney, assumes the duties of Deputy Director and managing attorney of the Newburgh office.

Rosalie Cicogna, Director of Administration



FEDERAL LAWSUIT CHALLENGES GARNISHMENT OF ELDERLY CITIZEN-S BANK ACCOUNTS



When Mary Frances's* niece gave her money to help pay her bills, she was grateful. The gift was intended to help her. Instead, it ended up costing Ms. Frances all of her social security check and all the other money in her bank account.

A legal services attorney was able to regain the money, but it was several days before she was able to access the funds. "I didn't have money for food or to pay my rent." Says Ms. Frances. "It was horrible." But in reality Ms. Frances is lucky compared to other seniors.

When Angie Smith's* account was frozen by a credit card company last month, the blind woman found herself without money to feed herself or her seeing eye dog. Although lawyers got the account released, the memory frightens Angie.

Due to changes in the law, collection agencies are more aggressively garnishing bank accounts. In the past social security payments were exempt from garnishment under federal law. But now when a person co-mingles them with other funds, the protection is lost and the account can be frozen by judgment creditors.

"At least one in every five cases that comes in has this problem." States Mary Grace Ferone, managing attorney of Westchester Putnam Legal Services in White Plains. "We try very hard to educate people and to explain that these are what we call exempt monies. The most important thing for the elderly to know is that social security should be kept separate from all other money."

According to experts, social security recipients should be careful to keep records. Typically, they advise keeping at least several months of bank statements, should there ever be a question regarding the money in the accounts.

"Those accounts should not be restrained at all," Says Ms. Ferone. "But taking steps to avoid co-mingling and getting direct deposit will at least allow us to get the money back quickly. These are people who are elderly or disabled - they have limited resources and if their money is taken they are not in a position to earn more. There's a reason that the federal law protects this money."

Karen Tobin, Esq., Staff Attorney

Congratulations Rocco Perrotta on 25 Years of Service with W/PLS



Getting more bang for the buck. We've all heard that phrase and understand it's meaning. In today's economy we have to stretch our dollars in order to meet the needs of the communities we serve. In fact, we have to find ways to maintain our services with less funding. This is not an easy task to undertake. How do we do it? Rocco Perrotta.

Rocco Perrotta, Manager of Operations/Finance, has been with W/PLS for 25 years. He came to work for W/PLS on September 5, 1978. Rocco arrived with a wealth of knowledge in financial, operational and administrative management. He was the Executive Director of the USO in Naples, Italy and Mediterranean Fleet Operations as well as the USO Tansonhut, Saigon and USO China Beach,

Rocco, together with Executive Director Barbara Finkelstein, frequently brainstorm to try to come up with new and creative ways to keep programs functioning for our clients. Each funding source requires a budget and Rocco is charged with creating a separate budget for that fund and assuring that the program is running within that projected budget. It is not an easy task. He also keeps track of everyday spending on a wide assortment of sundry necessities assuring that we get the most for our dollar.

Apart from the financial end of the business, Rocco keeps up with the day-to-day operation and maintenance of the physical building in White Plains. Whatever mechanical or structural repair is needed he is right on top of it. When offices were being opened in Yonkers, Poughkeepsie and Mahopac, Rocco was right there laying out floor plans for the build out. His experience in office management has been essential with regard to determination of office size, placement of copiers, fax machines, printers and every other aspect of starting up a new office.

Rocco built the first computer network system for the White Plains office and, with the help of one part-time employee, set-up an in-house mail server using the wpls.org domain name. He then extended the network to the other branch offices with email and internet access including on-line computer assisted legal research and CD towers holding valuable legal libraries. Today with a Network Administrator now on staff we have progressed to further cost savings by utilizing voice over ip (voip) technology and setting up a "server farm" in White Plains to maximize the resources needed to support a widespread service area now comprised of 6 counties. Congratulations Rocco.

Rosalie Cicogna, Director of Administration

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