

VOLS PRO BONO *f*ORUM

A Publication of *Volunteers of Legal Service*

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VOLS PROGRAM

The mission of Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS) is to conduct pro bono civil legal services programs to benefit poor people in New York City. VOLS programs serve these vulnerable populations: Children, the elderly, incarcerated mothers, persons with HIV/AIDS, and low-income microentrepreneurs.

CHILDREN: HOSPITAL PROJECT

In the VOLS Hospital Project, lawyers work with doctors, nurses and social workers as part of a team to improve health outcomes for poor children through the provision of pro bono legal services. For example, a child receiving medical treatment for asthma, whose asthma may be triggered by conditions in the family's apartment, will have a lawyer available to secure housing improvements from the landlord.

VOLS recruits both hospitals and law firms for the project, matches hospitals with law firms, and provides ongoing project coordination. The VOLS Hospital Project is now at eight hospitals. The project sites and matched law firms are:

- Bellevue Hospital Center (Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison);
- The Children's Hospital at Montefiore (Cravath, Swaine & Moore);
- Harlem Hospital Center and Public School 197 (LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae);
- Maimonides Medical Center (Proskauer Rose);

- Metropolitan Hospital Center (Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler);
- Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital of New York-Presbyterian (Cravath);
- New York-Presbyterian Hospital, Weill-Cornell Campus (White & Case); and
- New York University Medical Center (Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman).

In 2006, 133 families, with 290 children, were served by the VOLS Hospital Project. 169 volunteer lawyers and 51 legal assistants from the matched law firms participated in the project.

As examples of cases undertaken, lawyers at **Paul, Weiss** provided legal services to Bellevue pediatric patients in these areas: Removal of lead paint and mold from apartments; obtaining special education services; obtaining a new wheelchair for a child; and working on immigration issues impacting on the health of a child.

CHILDREN: SCHOOL PROJECT

In this new project, VOLS plans to match law firms with schools to address civil legal problems that threaten to disrupt the education of children. As examples, an eviction can lead to children having to withdraw from the school they attend. This can be a calamity for the children and family. Or an interruption in public benefits—cash or medical benefits or food stamps—can cause deep distress in the life of a family which will adversely impact on

the education of their children.

School administrators, teachers and parent coordinators would identify families in need of legal assistance. Legal issues most likely to be dealt with by lawyers in the School Project are housing, public benefits and immigration. VOLS has identified three schools for the project — an elementary, middle and high school.

Law firms interested in learning more about the School Project should contact **Bill Dean** at VOLS.

ELDERLY POOR

In the VOLS Elderly Project, pro bono legal services are provided to poor persons living in Manhattan who are over the age of 60. We conduct legal clinics each month at eleven East Side and West Side senior centers. We also provide services to clients from an additional 80 community-based agencies serving the elderly poor. Areas of legal assistance include wills, medical directives, powers of attorney, housing, consumer matters and Medicaid.

In 2006, the VOLS Elderly Project worked on 1356 cases. The project also conducted 47 legal information sessions for seniors and senior center staff on life-planning and debt-related issues, reaching 900 seniors and 200 senior center staff members. Over 150 lawyers serve on our Elderly Project volunteer attorney roster.

Here are client comments:

- “Thanks to [the volunteer lawyer], my daughter can cash my social security check at the bank.”
- “Thank you for offering this service. It is invaluable to me as a senior to have my papers in order. I have nothing but praise for the warm, friendly and professional way my case was handled.”
- “It was helpful to have [a] lawyer come to me at my house. I am a senior and have breathing problems which makes it difficult for me to travel.”

Lawyers interested in participating in the Elderly Project should contact **Oscar Straus** at VOLS.

INCARCERATED MOTHERS

Lawyers participating in the VOLS Incarcerated Mothers Law Project provide one-on-one legal counseling to mothers on child custody and visiting issues at the city’s jail on Rikers Island, and at two state prisons — Taconic Correctional Facility, a medium security prison located in Bedford Hills, and Bayview Correctional Facility, located at 550 West 20th Street in Manhattan — and conduct legal information sessions for groups of mothers at these institutions on their rights and responsibilities as to their children while incarcerated.

Volunteer lawyers assist mothers in these ways: Work with foster care agencies to bring children who are in foster care for legally mandated visits with their mothers; locate children within the foster care system; negotiate with family members and friends to bring children in their care for visits with their mothers; assist mothers to prepare for court hearings documenting the measures they have taken while in prison or jail to maintain contact with their children and improve parenting skills; and, when necessary, commence legal proceedings in Family Court to order visits between mothers and their children.

In 2006, 142 incarcerated mothers received individual legal counseling at 29 monthly legal clinic sessions at Rikers Island, Taconic Correctional Facility and Bayview Correctional Facility on legal issues relating to their children.

In addition, nine group legal information sessions on child custody and visiting issues were held for 193 incarcerated mothers and 9 staff at these facilities, and three staff training sessions were conducted at two of the facilities — Rikers and Taconic — for an additional 30 staff members.

Lawyers interested in participating in the Incarcerated Mothers Law Project should contact **Sara Effron** at VOLS.

HOW GOOD LIFE IS WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING
THAT IS GOOD AND JUST.

— Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*

PERSONS WITH HIV/AIDS

Over fifteen years ago, in response to the growing AIDS epidemic in New York City, the VOLS AIDS Project was formed to greater involve trusts and estates lawyers in providing pro bono legal services to people with AIDS. Initially, the VOLS AIDS Project served those who were very ill and facing imminent death.

Due to dramatic changes in the course and treatment of AIDS, far fewer people are being treated in hospitals. Now our services are being provided in outpatient and community-based settings, although volunteer lawyers continue to assist persons who are homebound or in the hospital. Lifetime planning remains the major focus of the project.

The VOLS AIDS Project operates at these four sites: the AIDS Service Center NYC; the GMHC Department of Advocacy and Legal Services; New York-Presbyterian Hospital's Center for Special Studies, and South Brooklyn Legal Services.

In 2006, 218 clients were served.

Lawyers interested in participating in this project should contact **Sara Effron** at VOLS.

LOW-INCOME MICROENTREPRENEURS

The VOLS Microenterprise Project provides pro bono legal assistance to low-income microentrepreneurs. Many poor people have a skill in a particular area — food preparation, clothing design, operating a beauty salon, child care, writing — and have the entrepreneurial spirit to start their own business, but have little practical knowledge about setting up a business. Many are looking to expand a home-based business.

The availability of legal services is very helpful to persons of low-income and limited business experience. Some participants in this project are supplementing their salary through microenterprise activity, while others will be totally dependent on income from such activity. Being financially vulnerable, they are in no position to fail. Working with lawyers can greatly increase their chances for success.

VOLS has recruited eighteen law firms for this project and matched the firms with non-profit eco-

nomie development agencies throughout New York City working with microentrepreneurs. The agencies identify low-income microentrepreneurs needing legal assistance and volunteer lawyers provide one-on-one representation on business-related issues and make presentations to groups of microentrepreneurs on basic legal issues, such as the appropriate structure for a business, or the leasing of commercial space.

In 2006, 157 microentrepreneurs were served by volunteer lawyers and 230 microentrepreneurs attended business legal workshops.

Here are examples of legal representation. Lawyers obtained licenses for a food vendor; reviewed commercial leases; provided legal counseling regarding business structure and licensing issues for a designer of hand-painted table cloths; incorporation of a business on behalf of a cabinet-maker; and review of contracts in connection with a woman's leather jacket line.

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 WHAT DO WE LIVE FOR, IF IT IS NOT TO MAKE LIFE
 LESS DIFFICULT FOR EACH OTHER?

— George Eliot

VOLS PRO BONO PLEDGE

Law firms with which we work are asked to take the VOLS Pro Bono Pledge to meet, or exceed, the VOLS annual goal of providing at least an average of 30 hours of qualifying pro bono work per attorney. The VOLS definition of qualifying pro bono work, with a few exceptions, is limited to providing free civil legal services to poor people, or to organizations serving poor people.

VOLS conducts an annual pro bono survey of our participating law firms. In 2005, New York City lawyers at the 41 law firms taking the VOLS Pro Bono Pledge contributed a total of 697,381 hours of free legal services to poor people, or organizations assisting the poor, through participation in the projects of public interest and legal services organizations, including VOLS projects. We are now collecting pro bono data for 2006.

NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL

Bill Dean concluded his *New York Law Journal* series, “Pro Bono Digest”, with his 146th column which appeared in December. He has started a new series for the *Law Journal* — essays on law-related historical and literary subjects. The first article, on books read by Chief Justice John Jay and other Founding Fathers when New York was the nation’s capital, appeared in the *Law Journal* on February 8.

CHECK OUT LAW HELP

VOLS is a member of the consortium overseeing Law Help, www.lawhelp.org/ny, a web-based resource providing information on legal services available to poor people in New York and information on a broad range of legal issues, such as housing, public benefits and immigration. Some information is available in Spanish and other languages. For information on training about using Law Help, contact Leah Margulies, Project Director, at 212-382-4712.

Pro Bono Forum is published by VOLS. Your comments are welcome.



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