



Planting the Seeds of Justice

In the shadow of the looming economic downturn of the late 2000s, NYLAG created two programs that provide critical legal services to low-income clients whose lives were upended by the Recession. In each case, The New York Bar Foundation (TNYBF) was among the initial funders whose vision helped launch these programs – programs that NYLAG has been able to successfully maintain and grow in subsequent years.

The New York Bar Foundation provides grants that support legal services organizations, nonprofits, bar associations and other organizations throughout New York State. Last year the foundation awarded over \$385,000 in law-related grants to 66 organizations statewide.

The Foundation has been a leader in driving improvements in the administration of justice throughout the state, enriching the law — and the lives of the State’s residents. The Foundation has long recognized the plight of poor and low-income individuals, who must face the civil judicial system without the support and guidance of an attorney.

“For over 60 years the New York Bar Foundation has provided legal service organizations like NYLAG with seed money to launch new initiatives that target the State’s most vulnerable populations, including the elderly, victims of domestic violence, at-risk youth, consumers dealing with economic hardship, and people facing homelessness,” said Yisroel Schulman, NYLAG’s President and Attorney-in-Charge. “Identifying and supporting new projects that respond to the most urgent emerging needs in our communities is a hallmark trait shared by both NYLAG and TNYBF.”

In a prime example, TNYBF supported NYLAG’s fledgling Justice at Work Project (JWP) just as the global Recession hit. Established in 2006, JWP’s mission is to educate low-wage workers in New York City about their rights in the workplace, and help ensure that those rights are enforced. Low-wage workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by their employers. They are often unaware of their basic rights as employees, including rights to be paid minimum and overtime wages, protections in case of illness or injury, and safeguards against retaliation when complaining about labor law violations.

With the onset of the Recession, as jobs became scarce, instances of workplace exploitation became even more widespread. Low-wage workers cannot afford to hire private attorneys, and few legal services agencies focus on individual employees. JWP began with one-year funding for a single attorney. Today, its staff has doubled, and it is one of only two legal services offices in New York that focus on individual representation of low-wage employees in employment discrimination and wage and hour cases.

The work of JWP's two attorneys is substantially leveraged by private law firms that provide pro bono representation in employment litigation. Each year JWP handles an average of 500 cases, and provides education about workplace rights to an estimated 800 people in the five boroughs. JWP recovers hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for clients in the form of unemployment benefits, wages and benefits, and job reinstatement. As it begins its eighth year of service, the demand for JWP's services has never been greater. According to a report from the National Employment Law Project, the job market may be improving, but the majority of the jobs lost since the downturn were in the middle-income range, while the majority of jobs added as the economy improves are low-wage.

In 2008, TNYBF again recognized a critical need and became an early supporter of another NYLAG program born of the Recession. The Foreclosure Prevention Project (FPP) was launched in response to the foreclosure crisis, and to the critical plight of low-income borrowers with subprime and unconventional mortgages facing foreclosure. NYLAG was one of the first agencies in New York to offer full legal and financial counseling services to low income clients facing foreclosure. Initially, staff attorneys estimated the lifespan of the project at two to three years – instead the program is in its sixth year and has grown dramatically.

Due to the nature of foreclosures, NYLAG FFP attorneys work with many clients for well over a year, providing representation and counsel in settlement conferences that are often the last chance for homeowners to save their homes. The Project also provides extensive outreach, community education, and financial counseling to help prevent future bad mortgage decisions, avoid destroyed credit ratings, and forestall a permanent descent into insecure housing, or homelessness.

The economic status of the individuals the project now serves has changed over the years. Because of the financial and housing crisis, foreclosure is unfortunately something that has adversely affected individuals of all socioeconomic backgrounds. FPP's client mix is extremely diverse, representing a variety of income levels and household compositions. The demand for services spiked in late 2012 after Superstorm Sandy struck, leaving hundreds of thousands of residents at risk of foreclosure. Fortunately, FPP is unique in its ability to serve all five boroughs and Nassau and Suffolk Counties, which were particularly hard hit by the storm.

Today, FPP has seven fulltime staff members who collaborate with key housing agencies to cover the region's most affected communities. Since its inception, it has helped over 2,300 clients enforce their legal rights, and given them the support they need to navigate a grueling and stressful process.

Millions of people throughout New York are still suffering the effects of the Recession, exacerbated by Sandy. Thanks to the foresight and commitment of organizations like The New York Bar Foundation, NYLAG continues to provide legal and financial services to many of them.