



LEGAL SERVICES FOR NEW YORK CITY

*Report*

## **THE LSNY SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> PROJECT**

For over 30 years Legal Services for New York City – LSNY for short – has had one mission: to make access to the legal system a reality for people who have no where else to turn. We are a network of non-profit legal services programs that provide free legal help in civil matters to low-income people throughout New York City. Today, with 17 offices located in transportation hubs throughout New York City, LSNY is the largest provider of civil legal services to low-income persons in the continental United States. Our programs include Bedford-Stuyvesant Community Legal Services, Bronx Legal Services, Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation “A,” Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation “B” (also known as “South Brooklyn Legal Services”), Harlem Legal Services, LSNY Brooklyn Branch, Legal Services for the Elderly, the LSNY Legal Support Unit, MFY Legal Services, and Queens Legal Services. Our core practice areas are family, housing, benefits, consumer, and education law.

Never have our services been more needed and more necessary than in the aftermath of the horrific September 11<sup>th</sup> attack.

### **IMPACT OF THE ATTACK ON NEW YORK CITY**

The September 11<sup>th</sup> attack had a devastating and far-reaching impact on the city – over 2,800 lives were lost in the attack; 84,000 jobs were lost in the fourth quarter of 2001, the “post September 11<sup>th</sup> period;” the city’s unemployment rate has averaged at 7.2% since the attacks, well above the national average; and, most recently, city officials have said that, with the current economic downturn and the loss of revenue suffered by the city last year, New York City is experiencing “the most severe fiscal crisis in its history.”

The impact of the attack on the city’s most vulnerable populations – children, victims of domestic violence, people with AIDS and HIV, the elderly, and the mentally disabled – has been particularly acute. Over a third of the jobs lost last year were from the lowest paid industries and sectors, such as retail trade, restaurants, and air transport. Government and agency disruptions following the attacks made the situations of those dependent on government subsidies for survival desperate. And people who lost their jobs or a significant amount of their income at or in the near vicinity of the World Trade Center and have not been able to locate jobs are facing eviction, foreclosure, and bankruptcy due to their loss of income.

In the face of this crisis, the response of the LSNY offices was to instantly spring into action. On the day of the disaster, we began working with our colleagues in the social services, legal assistance and advocacy communities to address the legal needs of New York City’s low-income residents as a result of the attack. Within days of the disaster, we had established a central “September 11<sup>th</sup>” telephone number for clients, and had helped train hundreds of private bar attorneys as part of the “September 11<sup>th</sup> Facilitator Training” organized by the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. Since the disaster, our offices have advised people on their rights; made calls and written letters on their behalf; assisted with applications for benefits; represented people before courts and administrative tribunals in negotiations, trials and hearings; filed appeals on behalf of people affected by the attack; mentored attorneys from the private bar; participated in September 11<sup>th</sup>-related trainings; informed policy makers regarding September 11<sup>th</sup> legal

matters; and disseminated materials through community education projects and outreach. Our efforts have reached over 7,500 people – people who, without us, would have had no where else to turn for help. And, by coordinating our efforts with our colleagues in the legal and social services communities, we have succeeded in bringing out the best that New York has to offer in a time of dire need.

### **LSNY'S SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> PROJECT**

To help New York's low-income population meet the legal needs they are experiencing because of the loss of income and trauma of the attack, we developed the "LSNY September 11<sup>th</sup> Project." Soon after the attack, we established a central telephone number – (212) 431-7200, Ext. 152 – for clients to call directly and for organizations to make referrals to LSNY. We designated staff members in each of our programs to accept referrals, facilitate provision of legal assistance in their offices, and coordinate assistance with other providers of legal services. The designated "9/11" staff members are responsible for tracking all of LSNY's September 11<sup>th</sup> cases, as well as coordinating efforts to reach out to other organizations and legal services providers, and coordinating assistance to September 11<sup>th</sup> clients. LSNY's September 11<sup>th</sup> activities include:

#### ***Providing advice and representation to individuals affected by the tragedy, including:***

- family members of victims in need of social security survivor benefits;
- families of survivors needing access to government benefits and charitable benefits;
- family members of victims facing landlord-tenant issues;
- family members in need of obtaining guardianships, or representation in connection with wills or estates of victims of the attack;
- people facing problems with government benefits because agencies were closed, files lost, and/or computers down;
- people who are now jobless, or have lost a significant amount of income, due to the attack who need representation in Housing Court to prevent eviction;
- people who need assistance with emergency public assistance, food stamps, social security and unemployment insurance applications, Section 8 applications, and FEMA applications; and
- people who need assistance in applying for aid from charities and from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

#### ***Training on issues related to the attack, including:***

- "Rebuilding for Whom? Spotlight on the Poor: A Working Conference," hosted by MFY Legal Services;
- "September 11<sup>th</sup> Facilitator Training," organized by the Association of the Bar of the City of New York;
- a training on "Working with Victims of Terrorism and Other Crimes," organized by the LSNY Legal Support Unit and the National Center for Victims of Crime;
- "Access to Jobs in Today's Economy," a workshop in which attorneys from South Brooklyn Legal Services and other organizations trained counselors and job developers on transitional benefits available to clients left unemployed by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>;
- a Community Law Day, sponsored by the New York City Civil Court, the Asian-American Bar Association, and the Jade Council, in which attorneys from MFY Legal Services informed people about legal issues related to the attack;
- an owner and tenant forum organized by the New York City Civil Court;
- a clinic on unemployment insurance benefits for low-wage and immigrant workers;

- bankruptcy and consumer debt collection trainings for advocates, organized by the LSNY Legal Support Unit;
- a series of trainings regarding disaster relief benefits presented at Queens Public Library branches sponsored by Queens Legal Services;
- a training for the New York State Alliance on Information Services, a statewide group of Information and Referral providers on Legal Information and Referral Resources on the Web, with an emphasis on September 11<sup>th</sup> related services available around New York State, presented by Bronx Legal Services; and
- trainings on Low-Income Tax Credits and Tax Relief Available to persons affected by September 11<sup>th</sup>, and September 11<sup>th</sup>-related legal resources, presented by Bronx Legal Services.

***Working with members of the private bar to provide free legal help to victims of the attack:*** LSNY staff attorneys have been closely involved with the coordinated effort for victims spearheaded by the Association of the Bar of the City of New York by providing mentoring and training to private attorneys in areas of our expertise, including guardianships, wills, social security death benefits, and landlord-tenant matters, as well as by accepting referrals and providing direct representation to victims.

***Public Policy Advocacy:***

- At their request, South Brooklyn Legal Services has been working with FEMA, the New York State Congressional delegation, and community, religious and labor representatives to ensure that FEMA responds effectively to the needs of thousands of low-income New Yorkers who lost jobs or income and face eviction, dispossession or foreclosure as a result of the September 11 attacks, by advocating that FEMA (i) expand its Mortgage and Rental Assistance (“MRA”) Program's eligibility guidelines; (ii) extend the program's application deadline; (iii) streamline its processing of MRA applications; and (iv) reduce its documentation requirements. In addition, attorneys from LSNY and other organizations working with victims of the attack have held trainings to educate FEMA’s caseworkers, and have increased community outreach about the program to ensure that all who are eligible for and need rental assistance receive it.
- LSNY’s program in lower Manhattan, MFY Legal Services, has been at the forefront of the planning sessions for the rebuilding of lower Manhattan, giving a voice to the needs of low-income residents of lower Manhattan. Activities related to the rebuilding of downtown Manhattan include: (i) participating in Civic Alliance (a coalition of more than 75 business, community and environmental groups working in support of the rebuilding of downtown New York City) meetings in order to ensure that the voices of poor people are included in rebuilding efforts; (ii) commenting on the housing assistance plan for lower Manhattan residents to the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation; (iii) meeting with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to promote community development in low-income communities; (iv) providing legal advice and representation to the Spotlight Coalition (a coalition of civic groups organized to ensure that low-income voices are heard in the discussion of rebuilding lower Manhattan); (v) meeting with the Planners Network to educate planners about the needs and concerns of low-income people after September 11<sup>th</sup>; and (vi) attending the Regional Plan Assembly in order to articulate the needs of low-income people and poor communities after September 11<sup>th</sup>.

***Posting law-related emergency information for advocates, social services providers and the public on the web through [www.LawHelp.org](http://www.LawHelp.org):*** Lawhelp is a collaborative website that is designed to assist low-income New Yorkers by connecting them to legal help, information and legal education materials in a number of different areas of civil law. In order to respond to the September 11<sup>th</sup> crisis, we have devoted a section of the website to emergency legal and resource information that is designed to be especially helpful to the communities that we serve. LSNY staff members have been gathering and posting and regularly updating information in such areas as housing and eviction prevention, emergency food stamps and Medicaid, special unemployment and disaster relief eligibility, custody and guardianship of children who have lost family members, and access to benefits. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, we continued to update and post emergency contact information for legal services organizations, and for government and public service agencies that were displaced or were experiencing communication problems. We also worked with law students from Cardozo Law School, Columbia University Law School, and other institutions to develop community legal education materials specifically targeted to and addressing issues of concern to those affected by the tragedy.

***Coordinating exchange of information and strategies among advocates:*** LSNY organizes and hosts a number of task forces in substantive areas of poverty law, including HIV Advocacy, Disability, Family Law, Public Benefits, SSI/SSD and Housing. These task forces are jointly organized with other providers of civil legal services to the poor, such as the Legal Aid Society and the Greater Upstate Law Project. As issues have arisen, we have devoted time at task force meetings to discuss the legal issues that are faced by poor and low-income New Yorkers affected by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and we have been coordinating strategies and approaches to address those issues.

### **III. CASE NARRATIVES**

Following are just a few cases that illustrate how people have been affected by the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy, and how LSNY's offices have been able to help them:

Mr. G, a disabled veteran who sold hats and gloves on the sidewalks of lower Broadway, was facing eviction from his supportive housing. After months of submitting documents to complete his application for Mortgage and Rental Assistance ("MRA") from FEMA, including notarized statements from shopkeepers confirming that he was a vendor in the area, his vendor's license, certification of his household income, and his landlord's notice of intent to evict, because he is self-employed, FEMA required that he submit tax records that established a 25% or more loss of income, which Mr. G was unable to do. With advocacy on his behalf from attorneys and paralegals at South Brooklyn Legal Services, including obtaining favorable press coverage, Mr. G was finally approved for MRA assistance.

\* \* \* \*

Ms. X, a single mother living on the Lower East Side, lost her job as a result of September 11<sup>th</sup> and was facing eviction for non-payment of rent. She had informed FEMA that she had been denied unemployment benefits and FEMA incorrectly told her she was entitled to Disaster Unemployment (DUA). As a result of that misinformation, she did not appeal the denial of her unemployment assistance and her time to appeal expired. LSNY's program located in lower Manhattan, MFY Legal Services, is assisting her with her unemployment claim and her housing case, and advising her concerning other benefits to which she might be entitled.

\* \* \* \*

With the decline in air travel following September 11<sup>th</sup>, Ms. C, with 5 children, lost her job as a flight attendant for a major airline. Soon thereafter, a holdover proceeding was commenced against her because the bank had foreclosed on her landlord. Ms. C turned to Bedford-Stuyvesant Community Legal Services for help, and its attorneys and social workers helped her obtain an emergency Section 8 transfer package and negotiated for Ms. C and her children to move into a new apartment.

\* \* \* \*

Ms. AA, a single mother of two young children, was threatened with losing her utilities because of her inability to work. She had worked at the World Trade Center as an administrative assistant. She escaped on September 11<sup>th</sup>, but lost many co-workers and her boss. Afterwards, Ms. AA attempted to return to work, but after several months she began experiencing severe post traumatic stress disorder and was unable to continue working. Her loss of income, coupled with her emotional distress, made her unable to pay her bills, and she was served with a court petition from Con Edison to seize her meter. Bronx Legal Services attorneys assisted Ms. AA in delaying the meter seizure, and arranged for charities to help pay her arrears. They have also helped her with employment-related matters, and in referring her to pro bono counsel for help with child support and other family law matters.

\* \* \* \*

Mr. H's Social Security disability file was located at 22 Courtlandt Street – the case had been pending since May 2001. After the attack, the building was abandoned; later, it was determined that the building could be re-entered to remove documents, but the documents removed had to be decontaminated before they could be dealt with. Because of Mr. H's disability he could not work, and because he could not work he was in rent arrears, and received an eviction notice. A Legal Support Unit staff attorney drafted a letter to the Regional Commissioner of Social Security on his behalf asking that his claims be given priority because of the possibility of eviction and homelessness, and followed-up with telephone calls to SSA's Associate Regional attorney. Fortunately, the decision in this case was issued soon thereafter and Mr. H could correct his rent arrears.

\* \* \* \*

Ms. S. suffered the loss of her husband, who was employed at the WTC, on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Not long after the tragedy a finance company started eviction proceedings against her and her extended family to remove them from the house they had rented from the previous owner. Ms. S. had been unaware of a foreclosure proceeding that had caused her landlord to lose the house, and had just paid him two months rent. Queens Legal Services attorneys had her eviction case removed from the court calendar and successfully negotiated a settlement for her. Ms. S. has recently found another home and is preparing to move.

\* \* \* \*

LSNY attorneys have also been able to assist many small businesses that, devastated from loss of business after the disaster, have had to file for bankruptcy. For example, LSNY Brooklyn Branch attorneys recently drafted a bankruptcy plan to resolve debts for a client who lost all of her business files on September 11<sup>th</sup> because she had stored them in the World Trade Center.

*For more information, contact Edwina Frances Martin, LSNY's Director of Communications, at 212-431-7200, Ext. 132, or at [edwinam@lsnycentral.org](mailto:edwinam@lsnycentral.org).*

*Released October 16, 2002*

## **LEGAL SERVICES FOR NEW YORK CITY**

***BEDFORD-STUYVESANT COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES*** — SERVING THE BEDFORD-STUYVESANT AND CROWN HEIGHTS COMMUNITIES FROM ITS NEIGHBORHOOD OFFICE IN RESTORATION PLAZA \* ***BRONX LEGAL SERVICES*** — SERVING LOW-INCOME PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE BRONX FROM ITS NORTH OFFICE ON THE GRAND CONCOURSE, ITS SOUTH OFFICE ON COURTLANDT AVENUE, AND AN OUTREACH CENTER LOCATED IN THE BRONX HOUSING COURT \* ***BROOKLYN LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION A*** — SERVING LOW-INCOME PEOPLE IN NORTH AND EAST BROOKLYN FROM OFFICES IN WILLIAMSBURG, EAST NEW YORK, AND BUSHWICK \* ***BROOKLYN LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION B*** — SERVING LOW-INCOME PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN AND WESTERN BROOKLYN FROM A CENTRAL LOCATION IN DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN \* ***HARLEM LEGAL SERVICES*** — SERVING LOW-INCOME PEOPLE LIVING IN MANHATTAN NORTH OF 110<sup>TH</sup> STREET TO THE BRONX BORDER AND WEST OF FIFTH AVENUE TO THE HUDSON RIVER \* ***LSNY BROOKLYN BRANCH*** — SERVING THE POOR OF BROOKLYN FROM ITS MAIN OFFICE ON JORALEMON STREET IN DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN AND OUTREACH OFFICES IN BRIGHTON BEACH AND WILLIAMSBURG \* ***LEGAL SERVICES FOR THE ELDERLY*** — PROVIDING LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO SENIOR CITIZENS THROUGHOUT NEW YORK CITY THROUGH TRAINING AND CONSULTATION TO ATTORNEYS AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS IN THE AREAS OF ELDER LAW, AGE DISCRIMINATION, PENSIONS, AND DISABILITY AND MEDICAL BENEFITS ISSUES \* ***THE LEGAL SUPPORT UNIT*** — AN ACCREDITED CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION PROVIDER WHOSE ACTIVITIES INCLUDE TRAINING ATTORNEYS, DEVELOPING AND DISTRIBUTING EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS, PROVIDING CONSULTATIONS TO ADVOCATES, AND COORDINATING TASK FORCES IN POVERTY LAW \* ***MFY LEGAL SERVICES*** — SERVING LOW-INCOME PEOPLE ON THE EAST SIDE OF MANHATTAN INCLUDING EAST HARLEM, THE LOWER EAST SIDE, AND CHINATOWN, AND THE WEST SIDE OF MANHATTAN BELOW 110<sup>TH</sup> STREET, FROM ITS OFFICE ON LOWER BROADWAY AND OUTREACH CENTERS THROUGHOUT THE BOROUGH \* ***QUEENS LEGAL SERVICES*** — SERVING LOW-INCOME PEOPLE THROUGHOUT QUEENS FROM OFFICES IN LONG ISLAND CITY, SUTPHIN BOULEVARD IN JAMAICA, AND OUTREACH CENTERS THROUGHOUT THE BOROUGH.

**LSNY** 350 Broadway, New York, New York 10013

