# RESTORING DIGNITY AND STABILITY

**LEGAL SERVICES NYC 2021 ANNUAL REPORT** 





## LEGAL SERVICES NYC

Legal Services NYC was founded in 1968 as part of the War on Poverty, an expansive set of initiatives introduced in the 1960s under President Lyndon B. Johnson. What started as a loose confederation of neighborhood-based legal services programs has grown into **THE NATION'S LARGEST CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES PROVIDER.** Our citywide force of more than 600 staff helps more than 100,000 low-income New Yorkers annually.

FOR LOW-INCOME NEW YORKERS FACING A LIFE CRISIS, LEGAL HELP IS OFTEN THE MOST EFFECTIVE TOOL IN RESOLVING IT. Roughly 1.6 million city residents are currently living below the poverty line—a mere \$25,000 for a family of four. They are often made more vulnerable by discrimination, immigration status, age, or disabilities.

**FOR THE LAST 50 YEARS,** our dedicated staff has challenged systemic injustices and made real, tangible improvements in the lives of communities across the city. This work includes preventing evictions and preserving housing; demanding access to high-quality education, health care, and economic security; ensuring safety and stability for survivors of domestic violence and immigrants; and fighting for the dignity and respect of all New Yorkers, including LGBTQ communities, New Yorkers with disabilities, and people of color.

WITH DEEP ROOTS IN COMMUNITIES IN ALL FIVE BOROUGHS, LEGAL SERVICES NYC HAS HANDLED MORE THAN TWO MILLION CASES SINCE OUR FOUNDING. We are proud of what we have accomplished and look forward to continuing to expand the scope of our work with the generous support of our individuals, partners, and communities across the city.

# A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

#### DEAR SUPPORTERS,

The COVID-19 pandemic hit New York hard, and although vaccines and increased safety measures helped slow the devastating impacts of this deadly virus, the reverberating effects are still being felt on our health, our economic well-being, and our lives.

**NOWHERE IS THIS MORE TRUE THAN IN THE LIVES OF LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITIES OF COLOR.** They continue to experience higher rates of infection, often work on the front lines, have limited access to health resources, and continue to suffer sociopolitical, racial, and environmental stresses that put them at higher risks for adverse health impacts.

As the City slowly starts to recover, New York City's most vulnerable communities are fighting to survive, to meet their basic needs, and to find economic security in these uncertain times.

### THANKFULLY, LEGAL SERVICES NYC IS FINDING NEW AND INVENTIVE WAYS TO HELP THOSE MOST AT RISK.

Our Workers' Rights advocates, for example, work tirelessly to ensure people get the most from their unemployment benefits. Last year, our team successfully pushed the Department of Labor to change the partial benefits system to allow part-time workers to base their claims on hours worked instead of days, a move that puts thousands of dollars in the hands of people who need help.

Our housing advocates are also on the front lines stopping illegal lockouts, fighting for repairs, and making sure eligible households are accessing ERAP funds (the Emergency Rental Assistance Program) to pay rent. Likewise, our immigration teams are utilizing every tool at their disposal to reunify families, win asylum status, and ensure stability so folks can begin

to make a life in the U.S.

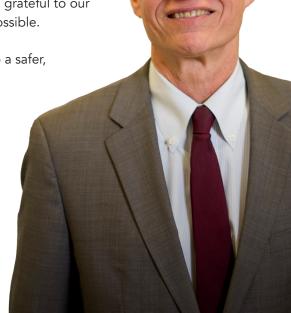
**AT THIS TIME OF GREAT NEED,** I am so incredibly proud of our staff, who continue to mobilize and strategize to meet the growing needs of New York's most marginalized communities. I am so grateful to our supporters, who make this work possible.

Thank you, and we look forward to a safer,

healthier, and happier 2022.

Sincerely,

Raun J. Rasmussen Executive Director





## WHAT WE DO

Legal Services NYC (LSNYC) fights for the rights of the low-income members of our communities in all five boroughs. We coordinate our services across practice areas to address legal problems faced by historically poor and persecuted populations including immigrants, veterans, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, people living with HIV/AIDS, and people with disabilities. Our multifaceted work includes:

#### PROTECTING HOUSING & PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

#### 53,392 NEW YORKERS HELPED

LSNYC prevents thousands of evictions and foreclosures every year. We force landlords to repair unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions and protect tenants against harassment. Our advocacy preserves affordable housing and prevents the displacement of poor families caused by gentrification.

#### SAFEGUARDING INCOME & FIGHTING CONSUMER FRAUD

#### 26,357 NEW YORKERS HELPED

We ensure access to benefits for people with disabilities, veterans, the elderly, and others. We put a stop to employers' practices that deprive workers of compensation, and fraudsters' schemes that often target low-income individuals and families.

### HELPING IMMIGRANTS 8 STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

#### 24.378 NEW YORKERS HELPED

Every year, we help thousands of immigrants and their families gain asylum and get on a path to citizenship. Our attorneys and social workers also secure safe and stable environments for victims of domestic violence and their children.

### SECURING ACCESS TO EDUCATION & HEALTH CARE

#### 2,534 NEW YORKERS HELPED

Our work to protect students' rights includes stopping inappropriate school discipline, and ensuring the that students with special needs get the services they need. LSNYC helps uninsured New Yorkers access public health benefits, and safeguards patients' housing, finances, and health care coverage.



**600 STAFF MEMBERS** served approximately 47,000 cases that benefited 100,900 vulnerable New Yorkers



**\$21,300,000** in cash benefits, settlements, and savings to our clients



\$154,900,000 in NYC taxpayer savings



**4,000 VOLUNTEERS** at scores of law firms and companies donated more than 62,000 pro bono hours helping

New Yorkers



**20,000 NEW YORKERS** who better understand their rights due to our trainings, workshops and community educational events



**38,500 HOTLINE CALLS** answered by staff fluent in 10 languages



# HELPING NEW YORK'S MOST VULNERABLE SURVIVE THE PANDEMIC

After New York State announced it would dedicate \$2.1 billion to an **EXCLUDED WORKERS FUND** to support undocumented immigrants who did not qualify for government assistance, LSNYC's advocates swung into action, tapping into their networks to educate undocumented communities about the funds and how to apply. LSNYC advocates created screenings and eligibility forms for applicants, worked with our Access Line team to develop

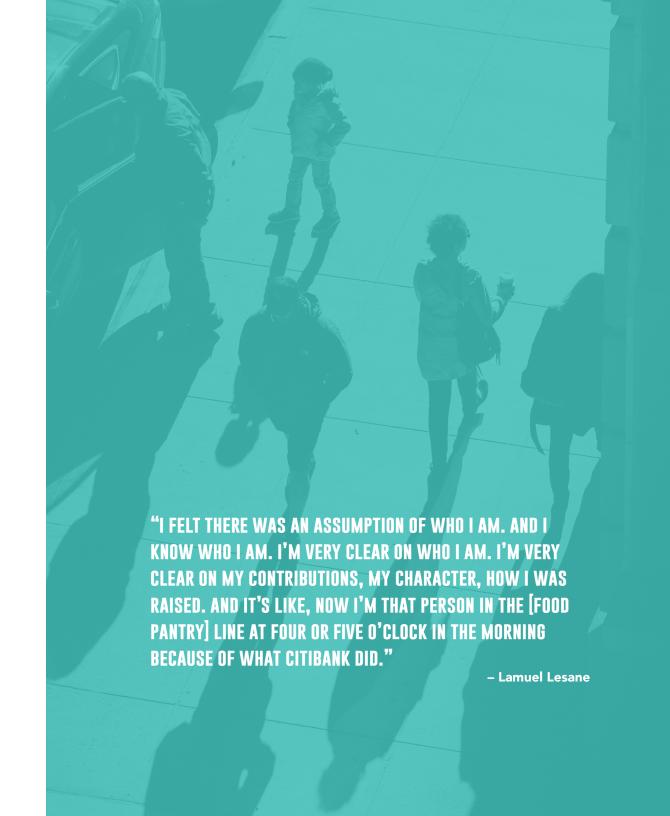
a script for callers so they could get assistance when they called, and hosted numerous webinars to inform communities about how to apply, documentation requirements, and obstacles. And their work paid off: New York distributed the funds to nearly 128,000 New Yorkers, creating a critical lifeline for the state's most vulnerable workers during the pandemic.

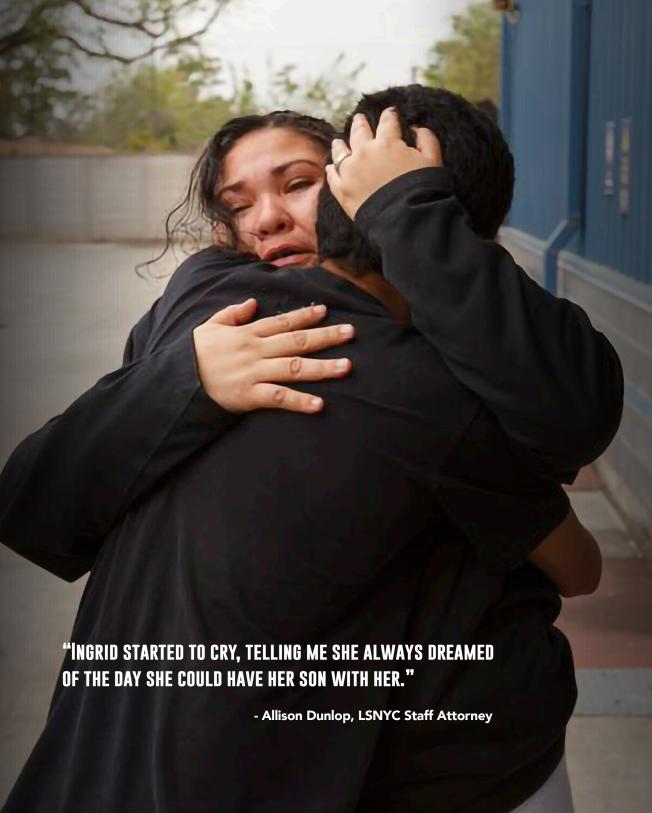
### RESTORING DIGNITY TO CONSUMERS OF COLOR

LAMUEL LESANE, A BLACK, DISABLED, 60-YEAR-OLD RETIRED ALVIN AILEY DANCER WAS THE VICTIM OF IDENTITY THEFT, WHICH RESULTED IN THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS STOLEN FROM HIS CITIBANK ACCOUNT. HE IMMEDIATELY REPORTED THE THEFT TO CITIBANK, BUT LIKE MANY LOW-INCOME PEOPLE OF COLOR, HE WAS MET WITH SUSPICION.

Lesane found himself fighting for months to get his money back, while concurrently fighting creditors and experiencing food insecurity. "I felt like I was a suspect," he recalls. "They even stated it in a letter, basically, that the amount of money that was taken out — they felt for some reason that I had something to do with it."

Thankfully, Mr. Lesane connected with Legal Services NYC attorney Mary McCune, who filed a lawsuit and negotiated a confidential settlement, which included an apology from Citibank executives. Mr. Lesane felt heard and hopes his case will change the way Citibank handles fraud claims in the future.





# REUNITING IMMIGRANT FAMILIES DURING A PANDEMIC

LIFE WAS MORE CHALLENGING FOR EVERYONE DURING THE PANDEMIC, INCLUDING FOR IMMIGRANTS AS COURTS CLOSED AND IMMIGRATION AGENCIES, EMBASSIES, AND PROCESSES GROUND TO A HALT. WHICH IS WHY IT WAS EVEN MORE REMARKABLE THAT LSNYC WAS ABLE TO SUCCESSFULLY REUNITE OUR CLIENT, INGRID, WITH HER SON WHOM SHE HADN'T SEEN IN 15 YEARS.

After Ingrid found LSNYC, we successfully obtained a U Visa for her and her son, Abner, who was still in Honduras. The only catch was that Abner had to enter the U.S. by March 3, 2021, or he would lose his opportunity entirely. Due to the pandemic, Abner's appointment at the Tegucigalpa consulate was canceled several times, but LSNYC finally was able to secure an appointment. While Abner's interview went well and his visa was approved, the consulate's usual process to generate the visa would have taken several weeks, and Abner would have been barred from entering with his expired visa. However, due to an LSNYC staff member's herculean efforts—including working with city agencies, the Honduran consulate, and many advocates—Abner got his visa and entered the country on March 2, just in time.

# FIGHTING ILLEGAL LOCKOUTS, SUING FOR REPAIRS

FRUSTRATED BY A STATEWIDE MORATORIUM ON EVICTIONS, LANDLORDS ATTEMPTED TO PUSH TENANTS OUT ANOTHER WAY—BY ILLEGALLY LOCKING THEM OUT. LSNYC ADVOCATES SNAPPED INTO ACTION AND BANDED TOGETHER TO CREATE LEGAL STRATEGIES TO GET TENANTS BACK IN THEIR HOMES.

Frustrated by a statewide moratorium on evictions, landlords attempted to push tenants out another way—by illegally locking them out. LSNYC advocates snapped into action and banded together to create legal strategies to get tenants back in their homes.

One such tenant, Mr. Otero, found an illegal latch on his door after returning from a hospital visit, preventing his entry. Although Mr. Otero's HASA caseworker found him immediate shelter in a semi-congregate setting, the injustice prompted LSNYC to take on the case—and win. LSNYC not only convinced a judge that Mr. Otero had a legal right to stay in his apartment, but also helped him find a locksmith.

LSNYC advocates also routinely fought and won court orders to force landlords to fix hazardous living conditions, like at 1515 Selwyn Avenue in the Bronx where tenants were living without heat or hot water, and contending with water damage and leaks, collapsed ceilings, cracks, and mold. LSNYC's Tenant Rights Coalition sued the landlord, Abdul Khan (named the fourth worst landlord in the city the year before) and settled, requiring Khan to pay nearly \$100,000 in rent credits and \$60,000 in damages for refusal to repair longstanding and dangerous conditions in the building.







# CHANGING THE LAW TO RECOGNIZE 8 RESPECT GENDER IDENTITIES

LSNYC ADVOCATES, WORKING ALONGSIDE TRANS INDIVIDUALS ADVISING LEGISLATORS AND THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE, HELPED GET NEW YORK'S GENDER RECOGNITION ACT SIGNED INTO LAW, WHICH MAKES IT EASIER AND SAFER FOR TRANS, NON-BINARY, INTERSEX AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING INDIVIDUALS TO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES ON OFFICIAL STATE DOCUMENTS.

The law allows New Yorkers to use an "x" to identify their gender on drivers licenses, allows people to list or change their identity on birth certificates to "parent," and waives an outdated policy that forced individuals to publish their legal name change in a newspaper. LSNYC, along with NYCLU, also sued New York State's Office of Temporary Disability Assistance (OTDA), the agency in charge of New York State Public benefits, for discriminating against nonbinary New Yorkers by refusing to offer a "gender x" marker on forms and in their systems.

# FORCING THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ASSAULT

IN A SETTLEMENT AGAINST THE NYC DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, LSNYC FORCED THE DEPARTMENT TO MAKE SWEEPING CHANGES TO ITS SEXUAL ASSAULT POLICIES, CHANGES THAT WILL HELP THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE DEALING WITH SEXUAL ASSAULT AND HARASSMENT.

The changes follow a LSNYC lawsuit against the department on behalf of four students who were sexually assaulted and whose pleas for help went unanswered. In addition to paying \$700,000 in damages to four student survivors, the department will make reporting and investigation processes more transparent to students and parents, make it easier for students to report assaults and escalate complaints, train staff on the new policies, and strengthen special education supports for students impacted by sexual assault and trauma.

"BECAUSE WE SPOKE OUT, THE DOE AGREED TO MAKE CHANGES ABOUT HOW THEY MANAGE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND RESPOND WHEN IT IMPACTS A STUDENT'S LIFE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOLS."

- Lisa Doe, plaintiff

### FORCING NYCHA TO REFORM RENT ADJUSTMENT SYSTEM

LSNYC AND PRO BONO PARTNER JENNER & BLOCK LLC REACHED A MAJOR SETTLEMENT WITH NYCHA REQUIRING THE AGENCY TO PAY TENANTS AND REFORM ITS ENTIRE RENT ADJUSTMENT SYSTEM TO PREVENT WRONGFUL EVICTIONS AND ENSURE THAT 400,000 NYCHA TENANTS HAVE THEIR RENTS REDUCED WHEN THEIR INCOMES CHANGE, AS REQUIRED BY FEDERAL REGULATIONS.

LSNYC filed a federal lawsuit in 2019 after NYCHA repeatedly failed to adjust rents and moved to evict tenants they were overcharging. NYCHA must now adjust tenants' rent within 60 days of a request, provide written confirmation and receipts when resolving requests, refrain from starting eviction proceedings while requests are pending, inform tenants of the new rules, train staff, and report to LSNYC every six months for three years on their progress.

"I HOPE THAT THE NEW RULES WILL LEAD TO MUCH NEEDED CHANGE AND THAT MORE PEOPLE ARE KEPT IN THEIR HOMES, RATHER THAN BEING THROWN OUT."

- Thania Acosta, plaintiff





### ADVOCATING FOR SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS TO KEEP UNEMPLOYMENT PAYMENTS

LAST YEAR, SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS ACROSS THE STATE GOT A RUDE AWAKENING WHEN THEY LEARNED THE NYS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WAS TRYING TO CLAW BACK SOME \$4,200 IN UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS THEY RECEIVED.

The agency claimed the teachers were no longer eligible due to "reasonable assurance letters" it sent them earlier in the year – letters that LSNYC advocates say the agency had no right to issue. Since then, LSNYC has been helping teachers fight the departments of labor and education to hold onto their payments, succeeding in a recent appeals case. They also used the power of the media to put pressure on the Department of Labor to do the right thing and stop collecting payments from struggling teachers, and continue to push the state to recognize their error.

"THEY SHOULD NOT BE CHARGING THEM WITH OVERPAYMENTS. THEY SHOULD NOT BE SAYING TO THESE FOLKS, 'YOU HAVE TO PAY BACK THIS MONEY."

- Nicole Salk, LSNYC advocate

# FINANCIALS

#### REVENUE

Legal Services Corporation and Other Federal Contracts	\$15,688,651
Interest on Lawyers Accounts	\$5,261,182
New York State Contracts	\$18,152,515
New York City Contracts	\$47,664,962
Events and Individual Donors	\$2,141,715
Private Grants and Contributions	\$2,110,808
Foundations	\$984,436
Attorney Fees	\$409,088
Other Income	\$52,328
TOTAL	\$92,465,686
DONATED PRO BONO SERVICES	\$47,356,904

#### **EXPENSES**



Program Services \$81,333,237

TOTAL - \$94,597,963

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- James J. Sandman, former president of the Legal Services Corporation



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