

# Neighbourhood Legal Services

*Serving the Community Since 1973*

**ANNUAL REPORT 2023–2024**  
**50 YEARS OF SERVICE**

*Presented to:*  
**Annual General Meeting**  
**September 26, 2024**



**Neighbourhood  
Legal Services**

101–163 Queen Street East, Toronto, Ontario M5A 1S1

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We recognize that we live, work and play on treaty land. Toronto is in the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory'. The Dish With One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous Nations and peoples, Europeans and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect. We recognize the role we must play as actors in the legal system to confront colonial harm to Indigenous peoples, and we continue to learn and work in order to play our part in honouring the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' Calls to Action and the Calls to Justice from the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry.

## Introduction

Neighbourhood Legal Services is a non-profit corporation registered in Ontario and a registered charity (CRA BN/Registration#11888 7090 RR0001). This Annual Report covers the period from April 1, 2023 – March 31, 2024, in line with our fiscal calendar. In this 2023–2024 year, we received funding from Legal Aid Ontario, the City of Toronto through the Investing in Neighbourhoods Program, the Canadian Red Cross, the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Law (in kind), the Lincoln Alexander School of Law (in kind); Dalhousie University (in kind); Management Advisory Services (MAS) (in-kind); Borden Ladner Gervais LLP (in kind); Maureen Silcoff and Sujit Choudhury (in kind); and Unity Health and the St. Michael’s Hospital Academic Family Health Team (in kind).

## Our Mission, Vision & Values

### Our Mission

Neighbourhood Legal Services is a non-profit and independent community legal clinic that has been serving the downtown east community of Toronto since 1973. We provide free legal services and assistance to low-income individuals who live within our catchment area and qualify for our services.

### Our Vision

We believe that the low-income residents of our community have a right to access to justice through effective legal representation, to be treated with dignity and respect, and to direct their own destinies. We work with the community to address the root causes of poverty and systemic legal problems facing low-income people.

### Our Values

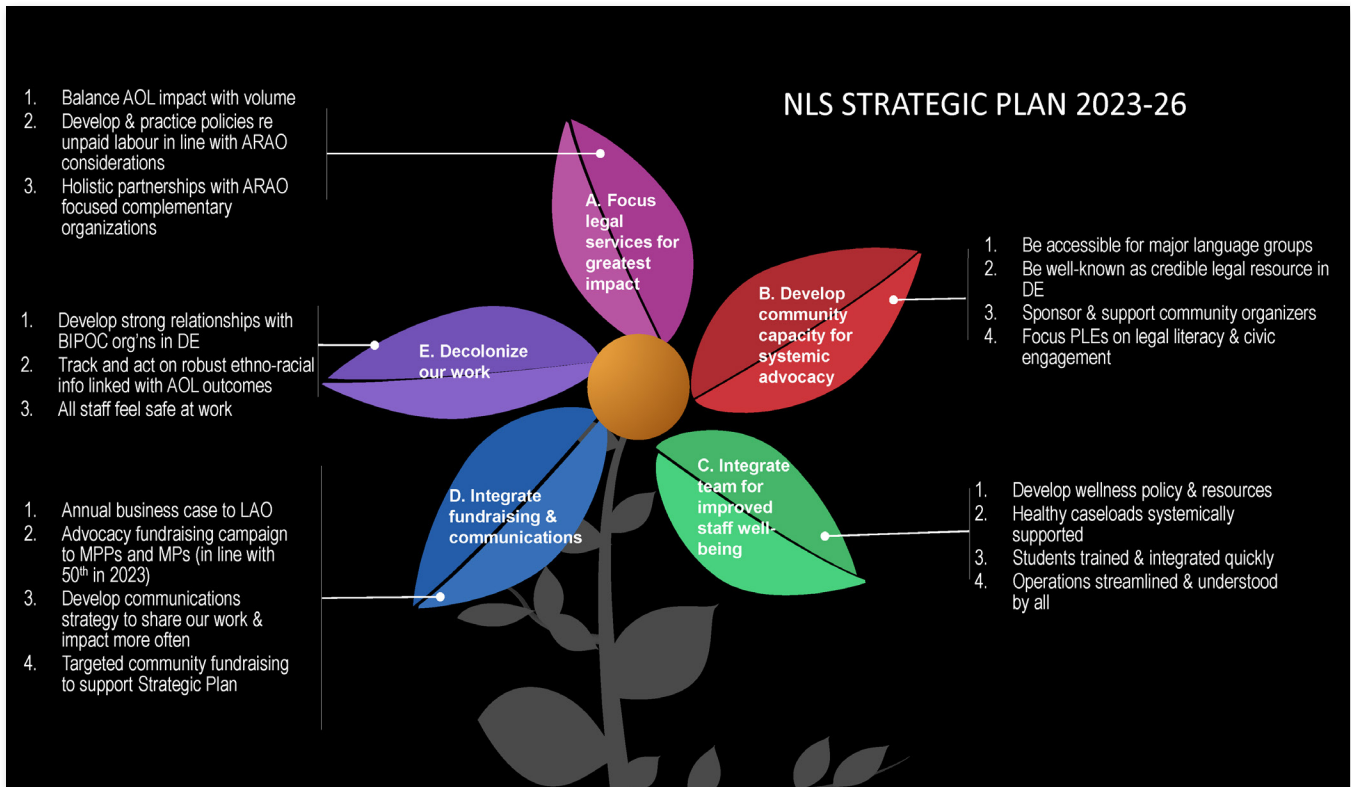
We are committed to confronting and combating racism, ableism, heterosexism, classism and other forms of oppression. We are committed to the promotion of the values contained in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#).



This painting occupies pride of place at our front desk. The artist is Maryam Hassan, a longtime St. Jamestown resident; budding criminal lawyer; NLS board member, and past law student contributor to our work. This painting symbolizes NLS working alongside local residents in the St. Jamestown community.

## Statement on Anti-Racism & Anti-Oppression

We recognize that Anti-Black and Anti-Indigenous racism lie at the foundation of our legal system. Harmful racial stereotypes and burdens of inequity impact our clients daily and impede their pursuit of justice. We acknowledge the role we play as actors in that system. In 2023–2024, we continued to work on our Anti-Racism & Anti-Oppression (ARAO) Action Plan. It has been integrated into our Strategic Plan and makes equity a leading focus for our organization.



To that end, NLS is building a culture where our staff have the right supports, training, and tools to deliver equitable outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and other structurally marginalized community members. In 2023–2024, this included:

### 1. Develop strong relationships with BIPOC organizations in the downtown east.

- Our Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression (ARAO) Committee created an asset map of BIPOC-led or BIPOC-focused organizations in our catchment area, and developed a script for staff to make connections and share the work of NLS.
- We visited the Native Arts Society on National Aboriginal Peoples Day in June.
- Heath participated in a Pride panel, Access to Justice By/For 2SLGBTQ Communities organized by Scarborough Community Legal Services, June 2023.
- Heath and Victoria staffed a booth in St. Jamestown during a Pride event, advising people on the services that NLS offers, June 2023.

## 2. Track and act on robust ethno-racial info linked with Area of Law outcomes.

In terms of our ongoing commitment to understand the systemic legal issues faced in our community, we continue to track demographic data and take steps to work with Black and Indigenous-led groups. In 2023–2024 this included:

- Collecting ethnoracial data for approx. 20% of new clients (with a goal to increase this percentage each year). Notably, of those who have been asked these questions and answered, to date 35% identify as Black.

## 3. All staff feel safe at work.

Internally, we strive for a workplace with a high quality of work life for Black staff and others from traditionally marginalized communities. That means a culture that is free of racism and oppression, where all staff can thrive. In 2023–2024 this included:

- Protected time monthly for staff to come together to study an issue relating to anti-Black racism, with topics including how racial bias operates; AI and racial justice; and the pernicious impacts of racial profiling.
- Thanks to a generous grant from the Canadian Red Cross, we retained a counsellor to build the capacity and skills of staff to engage in debriefing when impactful events happen at work; to recognize mental health indicators; and to foster a culture of wellness. This included fostering separate counselling groups for Asian and Black-identifying staff members.
- We also held a staff retreat at YMCA's Camp Pinecrest, dedicated to wellness, in January 2024.
- Natasha and Nadia participated in the racialized lawyers trial advocacy program, led by McCarthy Tetrault, in May 2024.





We also recognize our pressing responsibility to recruit, engage, and retain Indigenous, Black, and other structurally marginalized persons at all levels of the organization. In 2023–2024, this included:

- Successfully advocating to the Lincoln Alexander School of Law to obtain funding for the Integrated Practicum Students who do their placements at NLS. As of Summer 2024, two placements per term are now funded by LASL through their partnership with the Law Foundation of Ontario. This is a crucial step to ensuring we are mindful about our use of labour, and prioritize opportunities for students who wish to work in poverty law but could not otherwise afford an unpaid term.
- Attending the Colour of Poverty conference and learning about the Report of the Employment Equity Act Review Task Force, which forefronts the necessity of removing barriers in the workplace.
- Successfully bargaining a new Collective Agreement with OPSEU, for 2023–2026. We are proud that our unionized staff are now on par with their Legal Aid Ontario equivalents in terms of base salaries.

At NLS we have a lot of work to do, and we're looking forward to doing this work together with our team. As the Board of Directors and ED, we hold ourselves directly responsible for this work and to be accountable to BIPOC and other structurally marginalized staff, volunteers, and clients.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maryam H.".

Maryam Hassan, Board Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J Stone".

Jennifer Stone, Executive Director

# Key Highlights from 2023–2024<sup>1</sup>

## Our 50th Year!

NLS 50th anniversary event and fundraiser (Amazing Race themed) took place in September 2023. We made many community connections and had fun. **Six teams participated**, to honour five decades of advocacy and storied activism that has come out of the downtown east.



50 years of Advocacy & Resistance in the Downtown East

NEIGHBOURHOOD LEGAL SERVICES PRESENTS  
**THE AMAZING RACE THROUGH TIME**  
3pm to 6pm  
**SEPTEMBER 14**  
5 DECADES WITH NLS

JOIN US for an Amazing Race challenge (it's **FREE!**) from 3-6pm, followed by food, prizes & celebration at Daniel's Spectrum Community Living Room from 6-8pm

**Start: (between 3-4pm)**  
Neighbourhood Legal Services  
163 Queen St. East  
Just a little east of Jarvis on the south side  
**WE WILL CONFIRM YOUR START TIME!**

**The Rules:**

- Visit the 5 stations in any order
- After doing an activity, get a stamp on the appropriate square on reverse, and move to the next station
- End at Daniel's Spectrum for food, music & celebration from 6-8pm

**Finish: (until 6pm)**  
Daniel's Spectrum Community Living Room  
585 Dundas St. East  
**DON'T FORGET TO GET YOUR FINISH TIME CONFIRMED!**

**SPECIAL PRIZES FOR 3 FASTEST TEAMS WHO VISIT ALL STATIONS!**

- 70s** Housing Advocacy Ernescliffe Housing Coop 477 Sherbourne St.
- 80s** Early Charter & Equality cases Glad Day Bookshop 499 Church St.
- 90s** Austerity, Income security & health Sumac Creek Health Centre 73 Regent Park Blvd
- 2000s** Changing Immigration & Refugee policies Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture 194 Jarvis St.
- 2010s** Community Benefits for a changing neighbourhood 40 Oak St.

1 Note this Annual Report covers our fiscal year of April 1, 2023 – March 31, 2024.

## The Numbers

Further to how clinic law is defined in Ontario's Legal Aid Services Act and the strategic priorities set by our Board of Directors, NLS' staff (supported by law student volunteers) provided legal services in **1,135** matters in the areas of:

- housing law (540 cases),
- income security law (184 cases),
- immigration law (107 cases),
- employment law (54 cases) (through our Toronto East Employment and Immigration Partnership, "TEEILS"), and
- affidavits/notarizing (81 cases), and
- other Health Justice Program-referred matters (169 in addition to those included above) – such as wills and powers of attorney, as well as legal system navigation for diverse matters including criminal; family; personal injury law and others.

Through our Health Justice Program partnership with the St. Michael's Hospital's Academic Family Health Team, **252** of the above cases involved low-income patients connected to us by their primary care provider at St. Mike's. This important partnership was the source of 22% of our cases this year.

In addition, we provided numerous **referrals** for community members to appropriate legal resources. This shows our commitment to a "no wrong door" approach to facilitating access to justice for our community members. Further information about our casework is detailed in the pages that follow.

A summary of key issues from the 2023–2024 year includes:

### Case trends

It was only in May 2023 that we were able to make masking optional in our office. The 2023–2024 year was characterized by continuing to feel the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our community is struggling more than ever:

- More people are unable to maintain their repayment agreements they entered into when they fell behind on rent. Some of these agreements were coercive, but other times, these evictions simply reflect the failure of social assistance rates and wages to match ever-skyrocketing rents. One tenant on ODSP reported spending 100% of his ODSP cheque on rent for his one-bedroom apartment, and living off food banks to survive the month. We have been powerless to assist many people who have been evicted into homelessness as a result of these financial pressures.
- There is also a dearth of accessible social supports to help tenants meet the terms of behavioural conditions.



- We continue to develop our capacity on how to respond to demovictions as the neighbourhood faces increasing gentrification.
- Our clients continue to experience the worst effects of the digital divide. Clients often are unable to access their virtual hearings or navigate the new complex online portals required for their immigration filings.
- Elderly and vulnerable tenants in particular continue to struggle with the Landlord and Tenant Board’s “Digital First” system without an in-person counter. One tenant, who had no telephone or Internet access at home, missed her eviction hearing and received an eviction order because of an important surgery scheduled on the same day as the hearing. She did not know how to ask for the hearing to be rescheduled, because she could not call or email anyone to ask for help. After TCHC referred her to our office, we were able to help her obtain a review of the eviction order, and negotiated an agreement to preserve her tenancy.
- As staff, we have personally intervened in multiple overdoses, administering naloxone on our premises or outside our front door and convening with 911 to ensure medical care.

### **Accessibility**

- 64.4% of our clients this year were new.
- We continue to be accessible via walk-ins three days a week; by phone; by online intake; and through the HJP.

### **Public Legal Education**

- We have provided numerous public legal education and information workshops, both to the community generally, and in terms of our commitments to inter-professional education for the Health Justice Program. These are detailed on pages to follow.
- We also developed an easy-to-use evaluation tool for all of our educational activities in order to ensure maximum impact.

## NLS Staff, Volunteers & Board Members

The province funds us, through Legal Aid Ontario, for eight permanent staff. In 2023–2024, the NLS community was served by the following staff, students and volunteers:

### Staff

- Geraldine Thompson (Legal Administrative Assistant);
- Pauline Bennett (Legal Administrative Assistant);
- Marcello Ferrara (Legal Administrative Assistance – Health Justice Program, left NLS April 2023);
- Xin Meng (Paralegal – Health Justice Program, joined May 2023);
- Daniel Bastien (Community Legal Worker/Paralegal – Income Security, left NLS April 2023);
- Kathleen Castillo (Community Legal Worker/Paralegal – Income Security, joined June 2023 transferring from previous position as Legal Administrative Assistant);
- Heath Soave (Community Legal Worker/Paralegal – Income Security);
- Victoria Peter (Staff Lawyer – Housing);
- Brendan Jowett (Staff Lawyer – Housing, left NLS October 2023);
- Suchana Sundararajan (Staff Lawyer – Housing, joined October 2023);
- Natasha Manning (Senior Staff Lawyer – Immigration, and Intake Team Manager);
- Nadia Nadeem (Staff Lawyer – Immigration), and
- Jennifer Stone (Executive Director & Manager, Health Justice Program).



Our administrative team was supported by clerical support funded through the City of Toronto's Investing in Neighbourhoods Program, and we specifically acknowledge Heena Liqa for her contributions to our work in 2023–2024.

Our work is also supported through TEEILS (Toronto East Employment and Immigration Legal Services), a partnership with four other east-end community legal clinics called led by Don Valley Community Legal Services. Through this partnership we benefited from the employment law services of Yolanda Song for a half-day a week.

We also acknowledge Halima Hussein, who keeps our clinic clean and organized and helps whenever we have special events.

## Volunteers and Law & Paralegal Students

We are grateful for significant volunteer support for our work. In 2023–2024 our work was generously supported by:

- Edgar Montigny and Julia Munk of MontignyMunk Law, who continued to work with our Health Justice Program this year, by training and supervising HJP students for our Wills and Power of Attorney clinic pro bono.
- The University of Toronto Faculty of Law’s Health Law Program, and we acknowledge the dedication of Priti Gupta, Serena Meghji and Sydney Palter who were our HJP Health Law Externs this year.
- We also offered placements to several Integrated Practice Curriculum students from the Lincoln Alexander School of Law:
  - » David Ventura, Olivia Jarvis and Mofith Ahmed, summer students in 2023 (pictured right with Jodeen Williams—second from left—from Queen’s)
  - » Kafela Campbell, fall student 2023
  - » Shameka Spence, winter student 2024
- We acknowledge Dalhousie University’s Law Faculty’s funding for student Jodeen Williams work with our housing team in summer 2023.
- We acknowledge Legal Aid Ontario and the Clinic Resource Office, for facilitating a three-month articling placement for Talia Wolfe.
- Raianna Wedemire-Peart, a Paralegal placement student from Centennial college
- Hannia Raja, who volunteered with our immigration practice
- Abdallah Butt, Vicky Vu, and Sarah Guergis who generously volunteered with our housing and immigration practices during the year.



Finally, we are grateful to Scott Russell from Management Advisory Services (MAS) who provided a free workshop to our board on fundraising.

We estimate NLS and the Health Justice Program benefited from at least 2000 hours of volunteer time.

## NLS' Board of Directors

NLS was governed by the following community members and allies in 2023–2024:

Josh Vandezande (Chair, left October 2023); Walied Khogali Ali (Vice-Chair, then Acting Chair from November 2023, left March 2024); Maryam Hasan (Secretary, became Chair December 2023); Kevin LaForest (Treasurer from March 2023, became Vice-Chair March 2023); and Nathaniel Balakumaran (became Secretary November 2023).

At our AGM in November 2023, our membership elected or confirmed the following community board slate: Walied Khogali Ali; Maryam Hassan; Kevin LaForest; Debbie Hill-Corrigan, Habib Abdullahi, Hayley MacPhail, Kumsa Baker, Ambaro Guled, Sean O'Connor Hanae Davis, Nathaniel Balakumaran and Amna Farooqi. We thank this Board for their volunteer stewardship of NLS on behalf of the community we serve. We are deeply grateful for the expertise and perspective that each member brings to their role.

NLS thanks departing board members Josh Vandezande, Walied Khogali Ali, Habib Abdullahi, and Diana Mavunduse for their service to NLS.

We estimate our board volunteered at least 400 hours of time to NLS this year.

### Staff Wellness – Grant from the Canadian Red Cross

We were granted generous funding from the Canadian Red Cross to focus on Wellness for Frontline Workers. Tristan Yeom managed this project with great care. Over the year we used this funding to:

- Retain **Chris Leonard** for 12.5 hours/week to work on staff and volunteer wellness, including debriefing and counselling. With her colleague Snjezana Pruginic, they produced a Wellness Policy and Action Plan based on feedback from all staff.
- Retain **Alison Symington** to do the work of developing our student program, including the creation of smooth onboarding material and supervisor resources.
- Working with **Deloitte**, which hosted a half-day workshop with us pro bono to review a Customer Journey Map and make recommendations for improving our practices for greater efficiency.



## The Community Legal Clinic System

NLS is part of the Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) community legal clinic delivery system, a network of 70+ independent geographically based, racially focused and specialty-oriented community legal clinics. The former provides services mainly in landlord and tenant disputes, income security, employment law and immigration law while the latter provide legal services related to workers' health and safety and injury compensation, elder law, children's law, HIV/AIDS related law, housing and income maintenance, disability law, environmental law and public legal education, as well as a host of other civil law issues to low-income Ontarians.

The community legal aid clinic system complements other ways by which Legal Aid Ontario funds legal services for low-income Ontarians:

- Private bar lawyers working on legal aid certificates mostly in the areas of criminal, mental health, refugee and family law;
- LAO staff lawyers and staff offices providing services in criminal, family and refugee law; and
- Duty counsel offices in local court houses offering services mostly in criminal and family law.

Clinics provide legal aid services to people throughout Ontario who qualify. They are amongst the poorest in Ontario. We receive our funding from LAO, which, while operating at arms-length from the government, is in turn funded by the Ministry of the Attorney General (MAG) and the Law Foundation of Ontario.

NLS is a proud member of the Association of Community Legal Clinics of Ontario (ACLCO). The ACLCO plays an important role in helping to build and maintain the clinic movement. The result is a much wider and a much better understanding in the community and in government of the work that clinics are engaged in on a daily basis.

The ACLCO continues to advocate for the clinic system for more funding for clinics, for improved recognition within LAO and MAG for the unique work clinics do for clients in improving their economic wellbeing, while also empowering our clients. Clinics help create social capital in a way that few other sectors do because they work on legal issues, legal rights and social engagement.

The ACLCO is also a leader in learning and training for the clinic system. Their resources have supported training conferences in all Ontario Regions including the GTA and carry out regular trainings for clinic staff, managers and boards.

The 30% cut to Legal Aid Ontario in 2019 continues to be felt at NLS, resulting in a high turnover of staff due to our inability to pay competitive wages. This has impacted our ability to serve our community. At the time of writing, we are working with the ACLCO to advocate for greater investment in the legal aid clinic system.

## Areas of Law Reports

### Housing Work

Our housing law team in 2023-2024 saw a major transition with the departure of Brendan Jowett after over four years, who has supported our community in a variety of tenant organizing projects and innovative litigation. Our staff housing lawyer team this year consisted of Brendan Jowett, Victoria Peter, Natasha Manning (providing coverage during a housing team gap) and Suchana Sundararajan.

We also acknowledge the work and contributions of our housing placement law students Jodeen Williams, Kafela Campbell, Priti Gupta. Our housing practice was further supported by articling student Talia Wolfe, as well as the generous contributions of lawyer volunteers Abdallah Butt and Vicky Vu.

Together, our housing team provided legal advice, brief services, or full representation on 540 matters over the year. The scope of NLS' housing work is broad, with the majority of our work traditionally focusing on eviction prevention. Some highlights from the year include:

#### **NOTABLE CASES:**

- We represented a woman who won a \$23,000 LTB award against TCHC, for allowing our client to endure years of racist abuse and sexual harassment from a neighbor. When she reported the harassment to TCHC staff, they mocked her as though she wasn't worthy of sexual attention. TCHC appealed the order to Divisional Court. We got a final settlement order, correcting a small miscalculation but otherwise keeping the award intact – she's still getting almost \$22,000.
- We helped a client recover \$6,000 in overpaid rent resulting from TCHC mistakenly counting her child support as "income" for years.

#### **Public Legal Education & Information**

Our housing team regularly provides workshops for local community groups and social service providers to understand landlord & tenant law. In 2023–2024, this included:

- A tenant rights session for Ontario Works recipients in Fred Victor's WRAP program, April 21, 2023.
- Housing Law 101 for new mothers in The Neighbourhood Group's Perinatal Program, September 7, 2023.
- An eviction prevention workshop for Seaton House caseworkers to better assist their clients who may be facing eviction, September 21, 2023.
- A tenant rights workshop for ACORN at Wellesley Community Centre, October 28, 2023.

Our team also launched a new in-depth workshop to guide tenants through the process of filing applications against their landlords at the Landlord Tenant Board. This enabled us to provide this information to a wider audience than we have capacity to do at a one-on-one level.

#### Other projects included:

- Created materials to help navigate LTB’s digital portal.
- Attended TCHC’s virtual stakeholder consultation regarding their human rights complaint process.

## Income Security Work

Our income maintenance team in 2023–2024 consisted of paralegals Daniel Bastien, Heath Soave and Kathleen Castillo. We also appreciate the work and contributions of our placement students David Ventura, Raianna Wedemire-Peart, and Serena Meghji.

The majority of our files were ODSP medical eligibility appeals. We assisted 184 clients in preparing for their ODSP appeal hearings before the Social Benefits Tribunal, in addition to numerous other income security matters such as overpayments and coordination of benefits.

#### NOTABLE CASES:

- Assisted a severely disabled client with their ODSP application. Unfortunately, due to severe restrictions, the client required a high-than average level of support and had several failed attempts to apply with other agencies. His first attempt was nearly 10 years prior. NLS was able to coordinate a psychiatric assessment with one of our partners, which led to a lifelong ODSP grant.
- A \$13,000 ODSP overpayment was deemed incorrect and all payments collected were ordered returned to the client.
- In 2023, we saw a sudden surge of online scam issues for our clients, who were the victims of fraud. The stolen money ranged from \$3,000 to over \$100,000. Although there is little-to-no criminal or civil law recourse for these clients, we identified where our office could offer services and worked with our partners at Woodgreen Financial Empowerment Program to help ensure that seniors’ pensions were reinstated.
- We successfully settled an Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities denial. This is a benefit that NLS infrequently assists with.
- In 2023, the Ministry changed its’ intake process for Ontario Works, moving first contact away from local offices and centralizing it within the Ministry. This resulted in significant confusion for rapid reinstatement, which is the process used by many clients who leave

ODSP due to being financial ineligible but continue to be medical eligible. NLS successfully assisted ODSP clients with rapid reinstatement during this transition.

## **Public Legal Education & Information**

- Heath co-chaired the Social Assistance Advisory Committee for part of 2023 and then transitioned into the role of Training Coordinator for the study group. Through SAAC, they participate in the Toronto Employment & Social Services Managers' Meetings, which is a valuable site for advocacy and education.
- In 2023, Heath was invited to join the Provincial Steering Committee for Social Assistance and sits on the Social Benefits Tribunal (SBT) sub-committee, which allows clinics to meet directly with Ministry representatives and SBT Chairs and Co-Chairs.
- Heath took the lead in coordinating the social assistance sessions for the 2023 GTA conference, which took place in November 2023 at the Novotel. It was attended by over 300 GTA clinic staff and was an overall success. The social assistance training sessions included the 2023 Social Assistance update, by the Clinic Resource Office.
- Heath regularly consulted with HJP staff on ODSP appeals. Quarterly, they continued to field approximately 4–8 case consults on social assistance issues. Most of the issues were resolved by St. Mike's Family Health Team staff after the consult, meaning the client received timely legal information without having to book an intake with NLS.
- Heath continued to train St. Mike's Family Health Team members in 2023–2024. Trainings included:
  - » Income Security and Health Promotion Team – Completing the SBT Form 1 (Appeal) – September 2023
  - » Allied Health Team – Completing the Self Report – June 2024
  - » 2024 Family Health Team Residents - Completing ODSP applications
- In 2023, Heath was invited by CLEO to co-facilitate a provincial training on how best community workers can support clients through ODSP appeals. This was hosted online in July 2024, with Gillian Reiss from Willowdale Community Legal Service. Over 1000 signed up and approximately 400 people attended. The training was recorded and circulated through CLEO's network.

### **Other PLEs included:**

- Heath and David Ventura did a PLE at Maggie's on ODSP and OW eligibility, August 2023
- Heath Provided an information session on Legal Aid Ontario Services to Dixon Hall, in February 2024



A number of NLS clients were identified by the Income Security Team as potentially eligible for Developmental Services Ontario (DSO). To be eligible, the person must have significant limitations in cognitive and adaptive functioning. Eligibility was often flagged through ODSP Eligibility appeals, when clients disclosed having been enrolled in special education or resource classes throughout elementary and high school. Most often, clients had dropped out of high school and were not aware that they were eligible for supports through DSO.

#### When clients are eligible for DSO the benefits are threefold:

1. Clients are automatically eligible for ODSP as “prescribed class”. This means, they do not have to continue with the appeal or attend the hearing.
2. Clients may be eligible for Passport funding, which is funding to assist the client to participate in community. This is an additional \$5,500 annual funding for life.
3. Clients may be eligible for additional specialized services, like an adult protective worker, case management, supportive housing, etc.

This continues to be a valuable referral for our clients, as it simplifies access to ODSP and increases annual funding. To date, we have referred clients from the age of 18 all the way to their early 60's. This unfortunately highlights the gaps in services for people with developmental disabilities, as well as the high needs of our clients.

## Immigration Work

Our Immigration Team in 2023-2024 was Natasha Manning and Nadia Nadeem, with additional support from our ED (and former immigration lawyer) Jennie Stone. Our immigration work also benefitted from the contributions of Shameka Spence, Hannia Raja, Sarah Guergis and Olivia Jarvis.

The majority of our files continue to focus on regularization of status and family reunification. Natasha and Nadia remained Co-Chairs of the Inter-Clinic Immigration Working Group (“ICIWG”), writing letters of support on behalf of the group for movements like Status for All; leading informative monthly meetings, and taking on opportunities to get involved in systemic litigation work. Jennie Stone is co-chair of the Canadian Council for Refugees’ Legal Affairs Committee

#### **NOTABLE CASES:**

Our immigration practice continued the trend of strengthening involvement in systemic litigation and advocacy work. Nadia and Natasha co-led the initiative to establish the Coalition of Canadian Legal Clinics (“the Coalition”) in making an attempt to intervene in a case called *Gnanapragasam and Canadian Council for Refugees v. Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration)*; the case challenged the automatic loss of Permanent Residence status for persons whose refugee status was ceased, causing individuals to lose status and face removal from Canada. Nadia was Counsel for the Coalition, and she and Natasha established a mini working

group to draft a Motion to Intervene. While the Coalition was not granted intervener status, Justice Ahmed recognized the expertise and knowledge of the Coalition. Natasha and Nadia are keeping the Coalition alive with the intent to include even more legal clinics across Canada to intervene in more cases in the future.

#### Nadia is now a member of two counsel teams:

- She has been a part of the Family Separation Litigation team, under the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers, since 2022; it is exploring law reform in order to reduce the length of separation between parents and their unaccompanied refugee children overseas.
- At the very end of March 2024, she joined the Safe Third Country Agreement challenge (“STCA”) team representing the Canadian Counsel for Refugees, which challenges the STCA barring asylum seekers who came to Canada via the US from making a refugee claim in Canada.

#### Natasha and Nadia also had many wins for complex cases in the community, such as:

- An older woman who had a failed refugee claim and two failed H&C applications; her third and final H&C application submitted by NLS was granted and she became a PR in December 2023. She had been in Canada without status since 2011. She insisted on coming into the office to thank us in person and show us her PR card.
- Obtaining a Certificate of Identity for a member of the community, whom NLS assisted with his H&C application after he received first stage approval, and who was granted PR. After becoming a PR, he wanted nothing more than to travel to his home country, where he had not been in over 30 years. He shared that he was able to travel back and pray over the graves of his parents and sister, who had all passed away in the years since he had fled to Canada.
- Obtaining reopening for the files of four minor daughters in the Congo, dependents of our client who is a refugee mother. With conditions steadily deteriorating in the Congo, the young girls were facing significant risks. IRCC had closed their files in May 2022, and extensive submissions with evidence were made in March 2023. It was discovered that the overseas IRCC office had seemingly lost the submissions, and a Federal Court application for *mandamus* resulted in a settlement, and the files for all four children were reopened in November 2023 – exactly 18 months after the files had initially been closed. By April 2024, all four applications were granted.
- The granting of an in-Canada spousal sponsorship for a man in our community who was facing many legal inadmissibilities. The client had been unsuccessful in a refugee claim, and due to a mix up with updating his address, he did not receive his Notice to Appear to the CBSA until many months later. This led to a Canada-wide warrant for his arrest being issued. He had been a PSW during the COVID-19 pandemic and had selflessly

helped Canadian society during a critical time when he himself did not have status. Due to repeated COVID infections, he had become chronically ill. He had also gotten married, and he and his wife were expecting their first child. He also had two children in his home country from his previous relationship, who at the time were in an orphanage, as there was no one able to care for them. A spousal sponsorship was filed with humanitarian and compassionate arguments to overcome his many inadmissibility issues, and the CBSA asked him to appear. Nadia accompanied him to his appointment, and with careful guidance, he was not detained in immigration detention, which would have been indefinite. The client's application, including his two overseas children, was approved. Today, the client now lives with his wife and all three of his children in Toronto.

### Public Legal Education & Information:

- Nadia was a panelist at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture & Toronto Counter Trafficking Network on labour trafficking trends, May 2023.
- Nadia did an Immigration PLE for clients of The Neighbourhood Group's Perinatal Program, September 2023.
- Natasha gave a PLE on various immigration policies to Woodgreen staff, December 2023.
- Jennie judged an immigration law moot hosted by University of Toronto and the Department of Justice.
- Natasha and Nadia gave an overview of the jurisprudence on humanitarian and compassionate applications for permanent residence at the Canadian Association of Lawyers' national conference in spring 2023.



# HEALTH JUSTICE PROGRAM



St. Michael's  
Inspired Care.  
Inspiring Science.

## The Health Justice Program

The Health Justice Program (HJP) is an embedded legal referral service in the St. Michael's Hospital Academic Family Health Team (SMHAFHT).<sup>2</sup> This unique health justice partnership in a large urban Family Health Team, launched in late 2014, is the first in Canada to adopt a poverty law and social justice lens.

This partnership is comprised of St. Michael's Hospital's Academic Family Health Team, Neighbourhood Legal Services (taking the administrative lead) and three collaborating legal clinics: Aboriginal Legal Services, ARCH Disability Law Centre, and the HIV and AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario (HALCO). Each organization involved in the program has complementary expertise working with marginalized populations. We continue to develop and deliver legal support to address the legal issues of low-income patients related to their social determinants of health, stabilize clients' situations, and where possible, prevent cascading problems.

### The continued goals of the HJP are threefold:

1. To improve social determinants of health where a legal remedy exists for low-income patients of St. Michael's Hospital's Family Health Team, and in turn improve the access to justice ("legal health") of this population through preventative, stabilizing interventions before they become crises. The **direct service** offered is the cornerstone of the program, and helps to inform education and systemic advocacy initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> Patient population approximately 55,000 (~30% of whom live under the Low Income Measure) over five health clinic sites across the downtown east side of Toronto, with approximately 180 clinicians including physicians and allied health care providers.

2. To support and cultivate clinicians' abilities to recognize and smartly refer legal issues that impact their patients' health. As such, our **education** program continues to strengthen the capacity of Family Health Team & related primary healthcare community to provide services with a knowledge of their patients' rights within the healthcare system and how to navigate appropriate legal resources in the community. In turn, the HJP aims to improve legal partners' ability to deliver service within a trusted primary care setting.
3. To identify and take action on collaborative **systemic law** reform issues that impact low income patients' social determinants of health, and to bring together the legal aid and medical partners in advocating for positive change for the betterment of the populations we jointly serve.

## General Overview & Highlights

The HJP's functional "home base" is Neighbourhood Legal Services (NLS), with four accessible drop-in spaces provided at the St. Mike's FHT sites each month. During this past year, the HJP was served by Marcello Ferrara, Xin Meng (HJP's Paralegal), Jennie Stone (HJP Manager and Executive Director of NLS) and the following NLS-HJP caseworkers: Heath Soave, Kathleen Castillo (Income Security Paralegals); Victoria Peter and Suchana Sundararajan (Housing lawyers); and Natasha Manning and Nadia Nadeem (Immigration lawyers).

We are deeply grateful to Julia Munk and Edgar Montigny, who train and supervise our HJP externs to draft simple wills and powers of attorney. This has been a successful program with an ever-present waiting list.

### Case highlights:

- We successfully represented a client who was fighting a \$10K COVID ticket. We argued that he had been racially profiled at the airport, breaching his s. 7 and s. 15 rights under the Charter. The Crown withdrew the charges stating, "no reasonable prospect of success". We were supported by the Black Legal Action Centre in this case, and Priti Gupta from the University of Toronto's Health Justice Externship program.
- Demand for our Wills/Powers of Attorney clinic continues to be high, as there is scant help available for low-income people wishing to do advance planning. The HJP provided 23 consults to clients; in 5 cases simple wills and PoAs were completed by our Health Justice Program externs. Where document preparation is not suitable for client interests, we advise on other option.
- We worked closely with a client and their social worker on challenging a trespass notice given by the local ODSP office. We raised this issue with the Ombudsman's Office – the trend of dysregulated clients interacting with a hard-to-access office; getting frustrated; and no transparency around how a trespass notice will be reviewed. We look forward to seeing positive systemic change around this issue.

### Education highlights:

- Xin and Jennie are part of the Health & Justice Community of Practice, which meets monthly.
- Jennie participated in U of T's Welcome Day in February 2024, to talk about the HJP externship program.
- HJP paper on systemic advocacy work published in March 2024 ("Advocating for Policy Change: Examples Emerging from a Medical-Legal Partnership in Primary Care," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Heath gave a presentation to St. Mike's Social Work team on ODSP processes, May 2023.
- 2024 – final manuscript of complete *Health Harming Legal Needs* textbook (edited by J Stone & Dr. Rami Shoucri) submitted to U of T Press, forthcoming publication.
- 2024 – submitted final draft of chapter for special edition of *Health Law and Policy in Canada*, on COVID-19 and SDOH.
- 20+ 1:1 detailing to provide feedback/case consulting with referring healthcare providers
- Jennie and Xin hosted 3 x HJP externs from the University of Toronto this academic year. Jennie was granted an Arbor Award from the University of Toronto, for leading the HJP's student externship program.
- Xin developed Family Law resources for the Electronic Medical Records at St. Mike's Family Health Team, in cooperation with CLEO.
- Jennie, Xin and Dr. Rami Shoucri provided an orientation to family medicine residents on health-harming legal needs and how to collaborate with legal aid services several times throughout the year.
- Jennie was invited to co-teach a course at the University of Toronto law faculty on public health law starting January 2025.

### Systemic advocacy highlight:

The HJP, together with HALCO as a "Health Coalition", was granted intervener status in a case at the Supreme Court being heard April 25. This case is about how much deference courts should give to secondary legislation like regulations. We ask the court to give little deference because marginalized people who too often live in poverty lead highly regulated lives and must have meaningful ways of challenging regulations that govern them.