



# *New Beginnings*



annual report  
FISCAL YEAR 2023-2024

Volunteer Lawyers Network's Immigration Program and the Adult Education Center in Faribault celebrate their partnership in hosting a monthly in-person immigration legal clinic.



# New Beginnings

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VLN@VLNMN.org

## staff 2023-2024

- Tom Walsh  
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- Colleen Beebe  
Resource Attorney/Program Manager: Immigration
- Magaly Castro  
Case Coordinator: Immigration
- Barb Cruz  
Housing Clinic Coordinator
- Glen Drew  
Program Director
- Sebastian Ellefson  
Resource Attorney / Program Manager: Civil / Admin
- Elizabeth Fowlds  
Resource Attorney / Program Manager: Criminal Expungement
- Andrea Gonzalez  
Case Coordinator: Immigration
- Michael Greer  
Case Coordinator: Civil
- Luce Guillén-Givins  
Intake Specialist / Case Coordinator: SJS
- Heidi Huber  
Volunteer Liaison / Data Manager / Case Coordinator: Employment, Letters to Creditors
- Nancy Johnson  
Administrative Director
- Chris Kramer  
Resource Attorney/Program Manager: Bankruptcy
- Muria Kruger  
Resource Attorney/Program Manager: Housing
- Sara McClendon  
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- Joe McMurtrey  
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- Kara Rieke  
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Case Coordinator: Housing
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Case Coordinator: Family, Bankruptcy
- Vadim Trifel  
Housing Project Attorney
- John Weber  
Immigration Project Attorney
- Sonja Woodward  
Housing Project Attorney

## A Chance to Start Anew

Our theme, "New Beginnings," encapsulates the essence of what VLN and our volunteers achieve for our clients. New Beginnings come in many forms. For some, it is a path they actively seek to improve their lives. This includes individuals pursuing expungements of old criminal records that hinder their employment opportunities, those seeking to adopt a family member, or those filing for bankruptcy to recover from overwhelming medical debt.

For others, a New Beginning is unexpected and unplanned. This year's annual report highlights VLN's Special Immigrant Juvenile Status Program. The children helped through this program arrived in the United States and Minnesota in various ways from different countries. Despite their diverse journeys, they share a common story of being abandoned, abused, or neglected by one or both parents. Now, these children are living in new homes, thousands of miles away from where they were born or grew up. With VLN's help, they have the chance to start anew.

You, our volunteers and supporters, make these New Beginnings possible. You help people rebuild their lives after bankruptcy. You assist in removing court records that prevent individuals from finding safe housing. You support those seeking to become U.S. citizens. Your financial contributions enable VLN to make a significant impact in our community.

I am incredibly proud of what this organization, our volunteers, and our community have accomplished this past year. Thank you for being a part of VLN and for helping to launch so many New Beginnings for our clients.

With thanks,

Thomas Walsh , VLN Executive Director



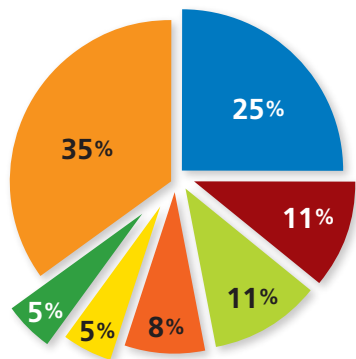
l-r: VLN volunteers Christopher Lenhart (Executive VP and Deputy General Counsel at US Bank), Theresa Harris (Senior Counsel at Target), Amanda Mills (shareholder at Fredrikson), and Claire Williams (associate at Stinson) participated in a panel presentation during VLN's 2024 Annual Housing Law Seminar. The panel shared viewpoints on volunteer housing court work and tips and tricks learned along the way.

Volunteer Lawyers Network  
uses the power of  
volunteers to protect and  
enforce the legal rights of  
low-income Minnesotans.

CLIENT INTAKE LINE  
612-752-6677

Monday	10 am – 1 pm
Tuesday	10 am – 1 pm
Wednesday	10 am – 1 pm
Thursday	10 am – 1 pm

*509 attorneys* took a new case during FY23-24: *7,574 services* were provided, including *2,885* provided at clinics and events, and *3,840* provided via telephone legal advice.

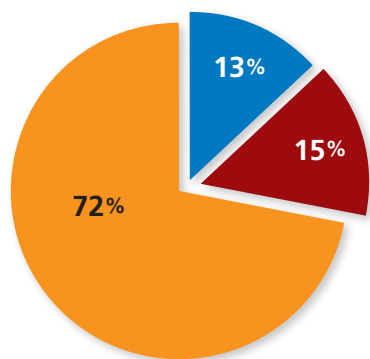


### Services Provided by Category of Law

Housing	2221
Family	1623
Immigration	1372
Consumer	837
Other / Miscellaneous	645
Criminal Expungement	505
Employment	371

### Top 10 Minnesota Counties Served

Hennepin	3189
Ramsey	1234
Anoka	563
Dakota	321
Washington	101
Stearns	90
Scott	90
Saint Louis	75
Olmsted	69
Sherburne	54



### Types of Services Provided

Counsel and Advice	5458
Brief Service	954
Extended / Full Representation	1162
<b>TOTAL SERVICES</b>	<b>7574</b>

### Client Gender

Female	3926
Male	2646
Neither Male nor Female	39
Unknown or Blank	20

### Client Race and Ethnicity

African or Black	2293
White	1967
Hispanic or Latino	1403
Asian or Pacific Islander	375
Multiracial	153
Native American	130
Middle Eastern	39
Other	87
Unknown, Not Specified, or Blank	184

## Special Immigrant Juvenile Status Work

Another critical legal service provided by VLN to low-income clients is through its Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) program. Although VLN has been offering this service since 2013, recent changes in the courts, legislation, and political landscape have significantly increased the demand for assistance. The program currently has about 30 active attorney volunteers, but to meet the growing need, they would need to triple that number.

SIJS is governed by a federal statute designed to protect vulnerable minors (up to age 21) in need of immigration relief. To apply for SIJ status, a child must have a state court order that finds they have been abused, abandoned, or neglected, and that returning to their home country would not be in their best interest.

VLN's SIJS program works closely with immigration attorneys to help them obtain the state court orders necessary to apply for immigration relief. The work done by volunteer attorneys in state court leads to a tangible outcome—enabling the child to

move forward with their immigration application. Ultimately, SIJ offers stability, work authorization, and a pathway to permanency for immigrant juveniles.

Since 2013, VLN volunteers have assisted over 230 juvenile immigrants with SIJ documentation.



During the 2024 VLN Annual Housing Law Seminar, speaker Judge JaPaul J. Harris imparts his high respect for VLN volunteers as he reflects on their impacts on the clients whose cases he's presided over.

## VLN Volunteers go the Extra Mile in 2024

### 2024 VLN Volunteer of the Year



**Kelly Clark**  
Heinz Law, PLLC

Kelly Clark is an attorney at Heinz Law, PLLC where she focuses on immigration law, advising and representing individuals, families, and businesses on a range of immigration matters. She enjoys the variety of work and helping

people and businesses navigate complicated and ever-changing immigration laws. Kelly has a passion for working with children and young adults, and she is thankful to combine that passion with her work.

Thanks to the support of Kevin Heinz, owner of Heinz Law, Kelly took her first pro bono cases with VLN in early 2019 in a niche family law/immigration law cross-section and never looked back. Kelly developed a significant pro bono practice and specializes in representing children and young adults applying for Special Immigrant Juvenile status. This work requires her to represent clients in immigration court and USCIS as well as in family and juvenile court. Kelly also takes monthly shifts for a VLN legal phone clinic.

Prior to law school, Kelly lived and worked in Central America. Outside of the office, Kelly is an active member of Minnesota Women Lawyers where she is a Chair to the Equity Committee and heads the Pay Equity Initiative. She is a mom to three young, active children that keep her on her toes, and she loves to be outdoors as much as Minnesota weather will allow.

### 2024 John D. Levine Pro Bono Distinguished Service Award



**Jerry Helfand**

**Jerry Helfand**  
Minneapolis Grain  
Exchange

Jerry Helfand retired from serving with VLN this spring, after 36 years of volunteer work.

Since roughly 1988, he has provided telephone consumer advice to VLN clients weekly. He has served over 3,000 clients. He has also taken cases in a variety of areas, particularly divorce.

After practicing law for six years, including clerking for U.S. District Judge Paul A. Magnuson, he decided to change careers and became a pit trader at the Minneapolis Grain Exchange. He provided the vast bulk of his pro bono work after the switch.

He wishes to thank the wonderful staff at VLN, who have provided so many resources through the years. He also wishes to express his profound gratitude to his wife, Joan Cleary, and to his children, Jay and Alex, for their support.

## LAP Clinic Resumes Court Presence

For more than 25 years, the Legal Access Point (LAP) clinic has provided legal advice and services to individuals seeking assistance at the Hennepin County Government Center Self-Help desk. The LAP clinic complements the court's pro se services, which offer procedural help but not legal advice. Through LAP, individuals representing themselves in court can receive guidance on whether to pursue legal action and how to respond to cases filed against them. For many years, the Minnesota Bar Association's Lawyer Referral and Information Services (LRIS) also staffed shifts at the LAP clinic.

When most in-person services were suspended during the pandemic, the LAP clinic transitioned to phone-based services. It is now gradually returning to in-person sessions. In-person LAP services are currently available four times a week, and the two-hour clinic fills up quickly. Program Manager Sebastian Ellefson, who oversees the clinic, says the LAP clinic could expand its hours with more volunteers. "The need is there; we just need a few more volunteers to help provide these services."

You changed **17,463 lives** during FY23-24, including **7,463 children**, through the delivery of pro bono legal services in Minnesota.



Mr Momand and his family received critical immigration assistance from VLN.

does not afford a path to a permanent immigration status, the project also helped Afghan families complete the prerequisite steps to be eligible for lawful permanent residence. As a result, many clients became eligible to apply for lawful permanent residence in the US. in 2023-24. In response to this success, VLN began providing full representation to Afghan families in permanent residence applications.

One such family, the Momands, was represented by VLN volunteer attorney Tess Olinger in their applications for permanent residence. Mr Momand had been working for the American military during the US war in Afghanistan, so he and his family were forced to leave their home in 2021 when the American military withdrew and the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Because of Mr Momand's work with the American military, he and his family could not safely remain in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. "If I'm in Afghanistan, and people know about me: 'Oh, he's worked with [the US] government...' [If I were there] right now? I'm not alive. [I'd] maybe die," he describes. So, he and his family were evacuated from the only place they had ever lived and brought to the US, and ultimately, Minnesota. Tess Olinger, a VLN volunteer from Winthrop & Weinstine who was assigned to the Momand family's case, summed up her assessment of the situation, "They sort of left in this rush and this hurry. I can't imagine what they dealt with and what they went through." Sudden evacuation and relocation to a foreign place is a common experience shared by each of the 300+ Afghan Project clients VLN has helped so far.

## 120+ VLN Afghan Project Clients Receive Permanent Residence

In August 2022, VLN's Afghan Project began helping newly arrived Afghan evacuees navigate the immigration system in the US. The project began by helping families extend the two-year humanitarian parole status given to many Afghans upon their evacuation from Afghanistan. Because parole

Tess began working with the Momand family in December 2022, when she represented them in their Petition for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), which Mr Momand was eligible for due to his work for the US government. After receiving approval, the family was eligible to apply for permanent residence. Despite having no prior background in immigration, with the support of VLN, Tess represented the family in their permanent residence applications and interviews. In June 2024, the Momands received their permanent resident cards – also known as Green Cards.

Since arriving in Minnesota, the Momand family has begun making a home in the US. After learning English, Mr Momand worked through Project FINE as an interpreter, and he has started his own business at the Mall of America, where he has two kiosks. "I think they have such a sense of security," says Tess, "I'm hopeful that can continue and that they can really prosper in the coming years."

As of November 2024, more than 120 applications for lawful permanent residence were approved through the representation of VLN's Afghan Project and its volunteers. This number is expected to rise to at least 250 before the upcoming year. A Green Card represents a huge milestone for all new Americans, but especially for those who may now be eligible to petition for family members they were forced to leave behind. "It's not that they [VLN] have only helped us here," Mrs Momand explains, "they have helped lots of people who came here."

With a huge smile and a thumbs up, Mr Momand reflects on his experience with VLN, "Thank you, Volunteer Lawyers Network. I am happy with you!"



Tess Olinger of Winthrop & Weinstine, P.A., provided volunteer legal assistance through VLN's Afghan Project to help the Momand family secure permanent resident status in the United States.



# New Beginnings

## Many thanks to our generous donors!

Donations received July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024

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Karen Yashar  
Julian Zebot  
Henry Zurn

[In Memory of Karla Keith Ellison](#)

[In Memory of John Levine](#)  
James Levine

*“They were extremely helpful in helping advocate on my behalf. I was already in the right; I just was not sure of all the technical terms and laws. VLN jumped right in to help my case and protect my housing rights.”*

—2024 VLN Pro Bono Client

**In Memory of Jane & Dan Hittler**

William D. Hittler

**In Memory of Richard Sorrell**

Shawn Sorrell

**In Memory of Bricker Lavick**

Perry Wilson

**On Behalf of Angela Porter**

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**On Behalf of MN Pro Bono Week**

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Rolf DeVries Smith

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**In Honor of Judge JaPaul Harris**

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**Matthew Thornton, Kyle Neitzel, Leita Walker, and Jonathan Bye**

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JAMS

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kiddywampus

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Maslon LLP



Volunteer Lawyers Network and The Advocates for Human Rights were awarded the 2023 Commissioner’s Circle of Excellence Award from the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS). These awards recognize excellence among DHS partners such as human services providers, counties, Tribal Nations, advocacy groups and other organizations that work with DHS to support people in achieving their highest potential.

Meagher & Geer, P.L.L.P.

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Messerli & Kramer P.A.

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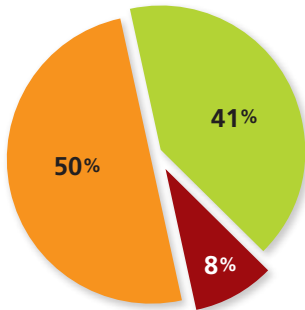
# New Beginnings

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## FINANCIAL REPORT

July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024

### Income

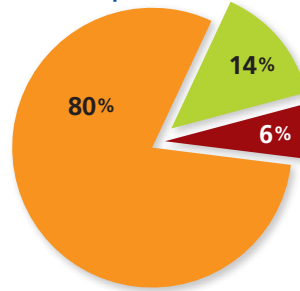


Contributions	1,163,714
Service Grants	969,000
Special Events	186,597
Other Income	7,726
Interest Income	3,766
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$2,346,823</b>

### Assets

Cash & Cash Equivalents	565,040
Contributions Receivable	252,478
Service Grants Receivable	242,250
Prepaid Expenses	24,396
Net Property & Equipment	75,758
Other Assets	4,568
<b>TOTAL ASSETS</b>	<b>\$1,164,490</b>

### Expenses



Program Services	1,848,639
Administrative & General	327,987
Fundraising	148,737
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$2,325,363</b>

### Liabilities

Current Portion of Operating Lease Liability	39,879
Accounts Payable	2,336
Accrued Payroll & Related Costs	34,735
Accrued Compensated Absences	66,206
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES</b>	<b>\$177,678</b>

### Net Assets

Without Restriction Undesignated	493,563
Board Designated for Cash Reserve Fund	479,307
With Restrictions	13,942
<b>NET ASSETS</b>	<b>\$986,812</b>
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES &amp; NET ASSETS</b>	<b>\$1,164,490</b>

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## Thank you!

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