



CITY BAR
JUSTICE
CENTER

REPORT

Legal Clinic for the Homeless

2009

City Bar Justice Center
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Who We Are

The City Bar Justice Center, a part of the City Bar Fund, Inc., is the direct services 501(c)(3) affiliate of the New York City Bar, one of the largest local voluntary bar associations in the country. The City Bar Justice Center uses staff attorneys and pro bono attorneys to assist 25,000 clients each year and operates the largest general free civil legal hotline in New York City. The Justice Center's close relationship with the private bar, and long experience responding to emerging legal needs, gives us a unique ability to leverage civil legal services.

Legal Clinic for the Homeless at the City Bar Justice Center

The Legal Clinic for the Homeless, founded in 1991, works with highly skilled attorneys and legal professionals to assist New York City's homeless families and those at risk of homelessness in securing state and federal public benefits, vital tools in poverty prevention and alleviation. Staff and volunteer attorneys, paralegals, law students and policy analysts offer advice, advocacy, and representation on issues such as accessing and contesting denials and reductions of public assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, and public housing subsidies.

The Legal Clinic for the Homeless pairs law firms, corporate legal departments and law schools with one of ten participating shelters in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Each firm, legal department and law school provides a team of eight to twelve legal professionals to provide assistance to residents of the shelters. A legal clinic, staffed by two or three volunteers, is held at each shelter every month. The Legal Clinic for the Homeless staff trains and mentors the volunteers, providing intensive case management and support. At least one staff member attends every clinic with volunteers, helping to spot and resolve legal issues. Between June 2008 and June 2009, the Homeless Project staff and volunteers served more than 700 families through representation, legal clinics, telephone consultations, community activities, and presentations.

“The recession is causing more families to fall into homelessness. Our pro bono legal clinics at shelters offer a helping hand to a parent and a child.”

— LISA PEARLSTEIN, DIRECTOR OF THE LEGAL CLINIC FOR THE HOMELESS

Food Crisis for Homeless Families in New York City

Legal Clinic for the Homeless staff and volunteers work to ensure that homeless parents are able to access government benefits that enable them to feed themselves and their children. Unfortunately, these benefits often are not enough.

New York is one of the most expensive cities for food in the United States, and food prices have only risen over the past few years. As a result, families are forced to make difficult choices between food and other necessities, inhibiting their ability to maintain a healthy diet. In the family shelter system, where half of all residents are children, the lack of an essential diet has a critically detrimental impact on growth, development, and learning.

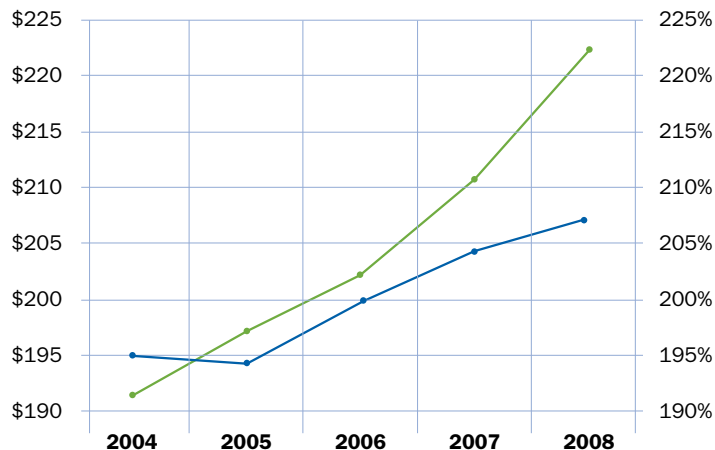
As unemployment continues to rise citywide, more and more New Yorkers are having trouble affording food, including many middle-income families that have never needed assistance before, according to a study by the Food Bank for New York City.

New York State's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance reports that the number of food-stamp recipients in New York City has sharply increased by more than a quarter of a million from 2008 to 2009. At the same time, the purchasing power of food stamps has declined as the amount in food stamps provided to individuals and families has not matched the rising cost of food.

In light of these pressures and constraints, the Legal Clinic for the Homeless and Fordham Law School's Feerick Center for Social Justice have partnered on a project focused on understanding and improving access to nutritious and affordable food for families in shelter and formerly homeless families who have been rehoused in the community. Informed by the experiences and needs of persons in family shelter, the project seeks to identify strategies, resources, and programs that can help promote residents' health and stretch limited food resources, especially in light of rising food costs.

Rising Food Prices Compared to Monthly Food Stamp Benefit

The figures in this graph apply to the New York City urban area.



— Food Prices Measured by Consumer Price Index*

— Average Monthly Food Stamp Benefit

* The Consumer Price Index is a measure of the average change over time in the prices paid by urban consumers for a market basket of consumer goods and services.

On average, a mother with two children who comes to the Legal Clinic for the Homeless receives \$380 in food stamps per month to feed her family.

Client Advocacy: Making Voices Heard

In many cases, the clients of the Legal Clinic for the Homeless have tried to advocate on their own behalf with little success. Having a legal representative advocate for them provides another voice to aid in the process. “When the welfare agency employees hear there’s an attorney on the other end of the line, they pay more attention,” said Whitney Potts, an attorney who has volunteered at the Regent Family Residence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan since she was a student at Columbia Law School. Many cases lead to the satisfying outcome of gaining thousands of dollars in restored or new benefits for clients.

Ms. L., a homeless mother living in a family shelter in Manhattan with her three-year-old daughter, had no money when she first applied for food stamps, public assistance and Medicaid, yet the City denied her application for benefits without any explanation. Ms. L. reapplied for benefits four more times during the course of seven months, only to be denied on each additional attempt. She was forced to go to food pantries daily and borrow from others. With no money for food, and frustrated with the system, Ms. L. attended an intake session for the Legal Clinic for the Homeless in January 2008. Her volunteer attorney discovered that the City had improperly denied each of Ms. L.’s four applications for assistance. The attorney requested a State fair hearing on her behalf. Ms. L. won her case and an administrative law judge ordered the City to issue to Ms. L. and her daughter over \$1,600 in retroactive benefits and to provide ongoing assistance.

Last year, Ms. F. was living in a family homeless shelter where she cared for her disabled son. After five months in the shelter, she secured an apartment and was about to sign the lease when her public assistance case was closed in error. Because the Department of Homeless Services requires clients to have active public assistance cases at the time of lease signing, Ms. F.’s landlord threatened to give the apartment to someone else if she did not sign immediately. When Ms. F. came to the City Bar Justice Center’s legal clinic at her shelter, she was devastated. She had advocated on her own behalf, but her requests were not answered. With one phone call, Ms. F.’s volunteer attorney was able to convince the State to direct the City to open her public assistance case pending the outcome of her fair hearing. The next week, Ms. F. and her son packed their belongings and moved out of shelter and into their new apartment.

“There is no greater reward than realizing that because of my efforts someone is going to be eating better and have more benefits.”

— JOSÉ ALMONTE, DECHERT LLP
VOLUNTEER FOR LEGAL CLINIC FOR THE HOMELESS



“Over the course of this past year, I have worked closely with the Legal Clinic for the Homeless in representing a client in need of public benefits. As an advocate, I participated in a number of administrative hearings which resulted in a favorable outcome for my client. This experience has been tremendously rewarding both on a professional and personal level. I am honored to work with the Legal Clinic for the Homeless as it plays such a critical role in assisting some of the most vulnerable members of society.”

— RACHEL ST. JOHN, HUNTON & WILLIAMS LLP
VOLUNTEER FOR LEGAL CLINIC FOR THE HOMELESS

Legal Clinic for the Homeless
Pro Bono Partners

- Citigroup, Inc.
- Columbia Law School
- Cooley Godward Kronish LLP
- Dechert LLP
- Holland & Knight LLP
- Hunton & Williams LLP
- Manatt Phelps & Phillips LLP
- Merrill Lynch/Bank of America
- Reed Smith LLP
- Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP

Legal Clinic for the Homeless
Partner Shelters

- Brooklyn**
- Arbor Inn
- Brooklyn Community Housing & Service
- Bushwick Family Residence
- Salvation Army
- St. John’s Place Family Center
- Bronx**
- Concourse House
- Fordham Bedford Housing Corporation
- Icahn House Bronx
- Manhattan**
- Clinton Family Inn
- Homes for the Homeless
- Icahn House East
- Pelham Fritz Apartments
- Children’s Aid Society
- Regent Family Residence
- Volunteers of America
- Queens**
- Briarwood Family Residence
- The Salvation Army