



## Looking Ahead to a Brighter 2021

### A Message from the Executive Director

With 2020 behind us, we look forward to 2021 with great expectation and hope for a better and healthier future for low-income individuals and families in our communities.

### Perseverance through a Challenging Year

The last year has been a time like no other in our lives. The pandemic has forced millions of Americans into unemployment and poverty, swelling the numbers of those in desperate need of our help. At the same time, the pandemic forced us out of our offices and required us to quickly learn new ways to operate, changes of a scale that few could have imagined. And amidst all of this, the killing of George Floyd (and the reckoning that followed) weighed heavily on our hearts. And yet, with resourcefulness and dedication, we kept the focus on our mission and ensured access to justice just when it was needed the most.

Last year, our staff and volunteers provided legal services in 16,720 cases. Our pro bono attorneys assisted an additional 1,701 clients with services ranging from brief advice over the phone to extended representation in court cases. Our attorneys and staff are working hard and continuing to provide their services remotely, focusing on the increasing numbers of new clients that are adversely impacted each week. During one week in January, we received and accepted 338 applicants for services with 22 percent seeking legal help to stop domestic violence and abuse.

Looking ahead, we are moving in the right direction with the availability of new vaccines, and I believe there is a new sense of hope that we will start to turn the corner and begin to get back to normality. However, the road remains difficult. As courts and government resume normal operations, we must expect a sharp increase in legal needs arising from COVID-19 to continue in the areas of evictions,

domestic violence, unemployment assistance, consumer debt, and income maintenance. And, at least in the short term, it appears that there is little new funding available to help us meet the surge in demand. This will require that we continue to explore new partnerships and innovations, to develop effective and efficient ways to serve the need.

In that regard, Prairie State is proud to announce our participation in three new statewide projects: **COVID H.E.L.P., New Leaf Illinois, and the Restore, Reinvest and Renew or R3** grant program. **COVID H.E.L.P.**, created through a partnership of several legal aid programs across the state, is a free web-based tool for people in Illinois who are facing housing, employment, and other economic problems because of COVID-19. **New Leaf** is a state-funded initiative made up of 20 nonprofit organizations throughout Illinois who provide free legal representation or legal information to people who want their cannabis convictions off their record. **R3**, is an exciting new grant program, supported with a portion of the tax revenues from cannabis sales revenues, providing a range of services targeted to support communities most impacted by economic disinvestment, violence, and the severe and multilayered harm caused by the war on drugs.

Regardless of the challenges ahead, we are confident in the value and importance of our work—the availability of civil legal aid can make all the difference to those fighting to stay in their homes, escape domestic violence, or address many other legal challenges that go to the heart of our client's security and well-being. It is in this spirit, we pursue our mission with a greater sense of urgency more than ever. With your ongoing commitment and support, we enter 2021 encouraged and inspired to keep moving forward with great expectations of an even brighter future for all.

Best wishes for a healthy and prosperous year.

Sincerely,

**Mike O'Connor**

Executive Director

Prairie State Legal Services, Inc.

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## Legal Aid Resources Available to Help People Impacted by COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many new laws, regulations, programs, and procedures affecting almost every legal subject area, as well as the court system. As the situation changes day by day, Prairie State Legal Services (PSLS) remains committed to serving its clients. Individuals may continue to apply for services through [online intake](#) and telephone intake by calling their [local office](#).



During this challenging time, it's important that individuals have information and resources related to their civil legal rights and issues that may be compounded as a result of the coronavirus. Below is a list of resources that can be found on our website's [homepage](#).

### Resources

#### COVID H.E.L.P. of Illinois

Many families are dealing with life-changing issues related to housing, employment, income, debt or the loss of a loved one. In response, **Illinois' legal aid community has launched [COVID H.E.L.P.](#)** (Housing and Economic Loss Prevention), a free tool for people in Illinois who are facing housing, employment, and other economic problems because of COVID-19. This is a joint project of [CARPLS Legal Aid](#), a nonprofit legal aid organization in Illinois, and other Illinois legal aid agencies that understand the cascade of legal problems the pandemic has unleashed on Illinois families.

PSLS continues to be available to help provide legal services, but this new tool is an easy way for people to access legal information as well as start an online application for legal help.

#### Tips for Renters

If you are facing eviction or utility shut-off during the COVID-19 pandemic, you may have special rights and/or assistance may be available to help you stay in your home. Many of the eviction rules have temporarily changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Information and tips for renters can be found in our [Renters Handbook](#).

#### Eviction Help During COVID-19

PSLS offers the following resources to help you understand your legal rights if you are facing eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- [Eviction Handout](#)
- [Eviction Toolkit \(All Counties\)](#)
- [Facebook Live Events](#)

#### Eviction Q & A

Several short video Q&As about eviction can be found on the PSLS YouTube Channel, [here](#).

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## **Additional Resources for Tenants**

The Illinois Housing Development Authority has COVID-19 Housing Resources, including a Tenant Declaration Form available on its website. [www.ihda.org/about-ihda/covid-19-housing-resources-information/](http://www.ihda.org/about-ihda/covid-19-housing-resources-information/)

Residents in many counties can call 2-1-1 for help with rent, utility, food assistance, and more. [www.illinois211.org](http://www.illinois211.org) (see covered counties [here](#))

[Rentervention.com](http://Rentervention.com) helps tenants with issues related to COVID-19 like evictions, rental assistance, and emergency housing.

[HelpIllinoisFamilies.com](http://HelpIllinoisFamilies.com) provides assistance with rent, utilities, food and more

Statewide court forms: <https://atjil.org/> (including Application for Waiver of Court Fees, Appearance, Notice of Motion, and Interpreter Request)

Illinois Courts' Remote Hearings

Directory: <http://illinoiscourts.gov/Administrative/remotehearings/default.asp>

[Illinoislegalaid.org](http://Illinoislegalaid.org) provides free legal information.

Find your local community action agency

here: <https://www2.illinois.gov/dceo/CommunityServices/HomeWeatherization/CommunityActionAgencies/Pages/default.aspx>

Find your local homeless prevention provider

here: <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=110583>

Townships may be able to provide General or Emergency Assistance to their residents. Find your township here: <https://www.toi.org/illinois-townships-map>

COVID-19 Housing & Utility Assistance Project: If you are a refugee, immigrant, or have low English skills, you may be able to get rental, mortgage and utility assistance through this project. Call (312) 793-7120 or email [dhs.bris@illinois.gov](mailto:dhs.bris@illinois.gov).

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## **PSLS Takes Multifaceted Approach to Combat Predicted Eviction Surge**

Last fall, the Aspen Institute reported that up to half of Illinois households were at risk of eviction. That represents up to 1.7 million people in 762,000 households. In addition, 30.5 percent of the adult renters in Illinois have no confidence or only slight confidence in their ability to make next month's rent payment, according to a recent U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey.

Despite the recent moratoria extensions, many people are still at risk of eviction. Prairie State Legal Services (PSLS) is actively working to ease the burden by getting factual information into the hands of individuals and families.

"There is a knowledge gap when it comes to the eviction process and moratorium," said Linda Rothnagel, Attorney and Director of Advocacy Training and Volunteer Services at PSLS. "The moratorium is not absolute; to be protected from the landlord filing for eviction and obtaining judgment, the tenant must be current in rent or have given the landlord a signed declaration that they are making best efforts to pay rent. To make matters more confusing, there are two different declarations, which apply in slightly different circumstances and not all tenants are eligible to sign a declaration at all."

According to Rothnagel, even if tenants know about the moratorium order, many people have never had to deal with the bureaucracy of applying for government aid or have never faced the court system before. This can be very intimidating.

"To help, PSLS has taken a multi-pronged approach to getting information out there," she said, "which is why we have focused on community education aimed at tenants through our weekly Facebook Live series on eviction. Additionally, our West Suburban office hosted a webinar for social service providers to explain the system. Another piece is working with our courts to put in place mediation programs so that landlords and tenants can more easily reach agreements. Another prong is the recruitment of volunteer attorneys to advise clients."

PSLS also offers several other electronic resources, including a free self-help Renters' Handbook, which is available [here](#). This 90-page handbook is packed with information on almost every topic that a renter may face during their tenancy including, but not limited to, different types of leases, dealing

with habitability concerns, security deposit issues, utility problems, evictions, and more.

Lastly, PSLS has a free Eviction Toolkit for people who are representing themselves in court. This toolkit contains information on the eviction process, tips for landlords and tenants to settle an eviction case, a rent repayment agreement template, a Motion to Dismiss template, and instructions for using Zoom.



## PSLS Board Member Spotlight

### Sonni Choi Williams, City Attorney, City of Lockport

This month's Prairie State Legal Services' (PSLS) Board Spotlight introduces you to City of Lockport City Attorney Sonni Choi Williams. Sonni was elected to PSLS' Board of

Directors on September 1, 2019. Since then, we have benefitted from her passion and dedication to advocating for our most vulnerable communities.

Sonni was inspired to be an attorney through her own experience in needing an attorney for a personal injury case and seeing her parents' interaction with their small business attorney. She said, "It was acutely clear that there were not a lot of attorneys who looked like me. I went to law school because I wanted to make a difference in the profession and in the communities that we serve."

Sonni saw how her position as a municipal and civil lawyer uniquely qualified her to fill a need in the community, but it was a mentor that gave her the motivation to become more involved. "When I started my career as a municipal attorney for the City of Peoria, Clifton Mitchell, a mentor of mine, was a former attorney at the PSLS office in Peoria," Sonni said. "He was very involved in serving on PSLS' campaign committee and introduced me to the great mission and work of Prairie State."

Sonni began to regularly attend PSLS' annual sponsor recognition luncheons and annual fundraisers, but soon followed the path of her mentor. As someone with a life-experience growing up poor, she knows firsthand the impact of how the lack of access to quality legal representation can impact the equal access to the quality of

### At a Glance

#### Education

Bachelor of Arts in History:  
University of Iowa

Juris Doctor: Northern Illinois  
University College of Law

#### Organizations

Prairie State Legal Services  
Board of Directors

Illinois Supreme Court to the  
Supreme Court Commission on  
Professionalism (2005-16)

Illinois Attorney Registration &  
Disciplinary Commission  
Hearing Board, Panel Chair

American Bar Association

National Asian Pacific  
American Bar Association

Illinois State Bar Association  
(Board of Governors 2012-18;  
Local Government Law Section  
Chair; Racial and Ethnic  
Minorities and the Law Vice-  
Chair; Leadership Academy  
Governing Board)

Illinois Local Government  
Lawyers Association (Board  
2013-19)

education, necessary healthcare, food and shelter. "My family and I suffered the impact of not being able to afford legal representation in many harsh situations," she said. "We were fortunate to get out of poverty with the help of private citizens and government assistance, so I have a deep sense and obligation to give back to the community through service and financial support to the organizations that help the vulnerable people in the community."

"I knew immediately," she said, "that the attorneys and staff working for Prairie State worked hard to make sure that the life safety issues facing their clients were being resolved with the utmost respect and quality legal representation."

According to Sonni, she volunteered for a pro bono divorce case and became good friends with Sandy Crow, who was the pro bono service coordinator for the PSLS Peoria office and now Judge Lisa Wilson, who was Prairie State's managing attorney in Peoria.

When asked about the pro bono case, she said: "The case was supposed to be a simple divorce with no children and assets, but as with any case, it was not so simple. My client's then husband was serving a criminal sentence in the Illinois Department of Corrections, so it was fairly easy to effect service on the husband, but what was unexpected was the husband was released earlier than expected and showed up at court. This was unnerving for my client who feared her husband, but in the end, the divorce was granted and my client was so relieved and grateful that she could finally start her life again."

On October 2, 2020, Sonni was appointed by Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker to the Illinois Guardianship and Advocacy Commission (GAC). "I was truly humbled and honored by this appointment to the GAC," she said, "whose mission is similar to Prairie State's mission, but is more focused on protecting the welfare and rights of persons with disabilities. The GAC provides legal representation, investigates complaints of rights violations and provides state guardianship for Illinois' population with disabilities."

Prior to her City of Lockport City Attorney appointment in June of 2017, Sonni worked for the City of Peoria for more than 17 years. She has more than 20 years of experience in municipal law and litigation of civil state and federal tort and injunction cases including arguing before state and federal appellate courts and the Illinois Supreme Court. Prior to her lengthy legal career with the City of Peoria, Sonni worked as an Assistant Public Defender in Tazewell County, an associate attorney at Dick L. Williams & Associates, and as a traffic prosecutor intern for the Tazewell County State's Attorney.

Lockport's Rotary Club

Lockport Woman's Club.

Will County Bar Association

Will County Women's Bar Association

Black Bar Association of Will County

Peoria County Bar Association

DuPage County Bar Association

Korean-American Bar Association of Chicago

Asian-American Bar Association Chicago

Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education

Northern Illinois University College of Law Board of Visitors

Lockport Township High School Foundation Board

#### **Awards**

2020 Northern Illinois University College of Law Alumna of the Year Award

2014-2015 ISBA Diversity Leadership Award

2010 ISBA Board of Governors Award

2008 ILGL Annual Achievement Award

She received her J.D. from the Northern Illinois University College of Law in 1999 and her B.A. in history from the University of Iowa in 1994. Awards include: 2020 Northern Illinois University College of Law Alumna of the Year Award; 2014-2015 ISBA Diversity Leadership Award; 2010 ISBA Board of Governors Award; 2008 ILGL Annual Achievement Award; and 2006 NIU College of Law Young Alumnus of the Year Award. Sonni is an active member of Lockport's Rotary Club and Lockport Woman's Club.

2006 NIU College of Law  
Young Alumnus of the Year  
Award

## Prairie State Joins Network to Offer Cannabis Expungement

Prairie State Legal Services is a founding member and partner of New Leaf Illinois, a new network of 20 non-profit organizations throughout the state who are providing free legal representation and other resources to help qualifying individuals seeking to expunge cannabis convictions from their records. New Leaf Illinois was made possible by specific funding requirements of the 2019 Illinois cannabis legalization law.

New Leaf Illinois is committed to equal justice for all those who were previously arrested or convicted for cannabis use, production, and sale. Expungement (meaning an applicant's arrest, charge or criminal conviction cannot be viewed by the public) is one step toward repairing the damage caused by the war on drugs which unfairly impacted people of color and the economically disenfranchised. That includes greatly improving applicants' chances of getting hired, improving their education, seeking public assistance and acquiring rental housing.

"Expungements through the New Leaf program provide protection for individuals facing housing or job discrimination based on old cannabis records," said Lacy Burpee, R2W Program Coordinator and Staff Attorney at Prairie State's Waukegan office. "A criminal record can follow someone for life. New Leaf provides individuals with cannabis records a way to move beyond their past and into their future."

Those seeking help from New Leaf Illinois may register online at [www.NewLeafIllinois.org](http://www.NewLeafIllinois.org) or call (855) 963-9532. A legal aid professional will evaluate the applicant's eligibility and get in touch with them to discuss potential next steps. Depending on eligibility and needs, services can include free legal information, self-help instruction, document review and preparation, legal consultation, and if available, referrals to a network of legal aid and pro bono attorneys for in-court representation.

If you or someone you know could benefit from getting a cannabis record expunged, visit [www.NewLeafIllinois.org](http://www.NewLeafIllinois.org).



clearing cannabis convictions



## Kankakee Office Moves to Enhance Client Service

After more than 35 years at its 191 South Chicago Avenue location, the Kankakee office moved to a larger, more efficient office on December 15. Their new address is:

**187 S. Schuyler Avenue, Suite 350**

**Kankakee, IL 60901**

The new office space is ADA compliant to serve clients with disabilities. Phone numbers, fax, and emails remain the same.

## Prairie State in the News

Check out the following news coverage featuring Prairie State Legal Services.

**Quad City Times - [Legal service can help clear old criminal records](#)**

**Peoria Public Radio - [Gordon-Booth Touts Program To Help Expunge Cannabis Convictions](#)**

**The Pantagraph (Bloomington) – [A Message for Washington: Bloomington rally calls for federal COVID relief help](#)**

**Daily Journal (Kankakee) - [Virtual event from legal team tackles bankruptcy and foreclosure](#)**

**WGLT 89.1 NPR from Illinois State University (Bloomington) - [On Deck - Monday, December 21, 2020](#)**

**WNIJ News (Northern Public Radio) - [Free Legal Aid For Illinoisans Facing Eviction](#)**



The Woodstock Independent (Woodstock) - [‘The need remains steady’](#)

WGLT 89.1 NPR from Illinois State University (Bloomington) - [WGLT Sound Ideas- 1/28/21](#)

WGLT 89.1 NPR from Illinois State University (Bloomington) - [Bloomington Agencies Expand Services With Cannabis Tax Grants](#)

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## How Can You Help?



### Give your time.

Whether you are an attorney seeking to do pro bono work or a community member who wishes to help us raise awareness and increase revenue to fulfill our mission, Prairie State Legal Services can use your help!

Learn how to get involved and help people in need of civil legal aid. Visit [pslegal.org/volunteer](https://pslegal.org/volunteer) or email [volunteer@pslegal.org](mailto:volunteer@pslegal.org) to learn more today!

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### Give while you buy.

Make your Amazon purchase count! Use AmazonSmile to help Prairie State

Shop on [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com) and designate "Prairie State Legal Services, Inc." as your organization to support before checking out. It's easy and effective! Every little bit helps!

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## Give Online

Visit [pslegal.org/donate](https://pslegal.org/donate) to make a donation of your choice to help those in need of critical civil legal aid. Better yet, click "Make This A Monthly Gift" to make it easier on your pocketbook and to help guarantee that Prairie State Legal Services has a steady source of income throughout the year!

## About Prairie State Legal Services

Since its formation in 1977, Prairie State Legal Services has offered free [legal services](#) for [low income persons](#) and those age 60 and over who have serious civil legal problems and need legal help to solve them. We have 11 [office locations](#) serving 36 counties in northern and central Illinois.

Prairie State Legal Services is a charitable not-for-profit organization and gifts are tax deductible under IRS section 501(c)(3).

Learn about [ways to donate](#). Ask us about [volunteer opportunities](#). Consider us for [cy pres awards](#).

**Give**

Visit our website!

[www.pslegal.org](https://www.pslegal.org).



Prairie State Legal Services is funded in part by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). As a condition of the funding it receives from LSC, it is restricted from engaging in certain activities in all of its legal work--including work supported by other funding sources. Prairie State Legal Services may not expend any funds for any activity prohibited by the Legal Services Corporation Act, 42 U.S.C. 2996 et seq. or by Public Law 104-134, §504(a). Public Law 104-134 §504(d) requires that notice of these restrictions be given to all funders of programs funded by the Legal Services Corporation. Please contact our Administrative Office at (815) 965-2134 for more information regarding these prohibitions.

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