



PRESS RELEASE

**New York State
Unified Court System**

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Chief Judge Janet DiFiore Welcomes Local Residents to Brownsville’s Newly Launched Walk-in Legal Help Center

NEW YORK — Chief Judge Janet DiFiore joined State Senator Jesse Hamilton, State Assembly Member Latrice Walker, other elected officials and community advocates at an open house to welcome area residents to the Legal Hand Brownsville Center, one of a network of walk-in sites in New York City to bring specially trained community volunteers directly into low-income neighborhoods, offering free information, assistance and referrals to local residents grappling with legal problems relating to life’s essentials.

The Brownsville, Brooklyn center builds on the court system’s successful “Navigators” program, which utilizes specially trained non-lawyer volunteers to provide basic information and support to unrepresented litigants in housing and consumer credit cases in New York City. While the Navigator program operates in courtrooms and courthouses, the Legal Hand initiative makes such assistance readily available to people where they live, eliminating one of the biggest obstacles to access to justice for the poor and those of modest means — distance.

Developed in collaboration with New York Permanent Commission on Access to Justice Chair Helaine Barnett, the Brownsville site is run by the Center for Court Innovation in conjunction with the Legal Aid Society and with support from the Brownsville Community

Justice Center. In addition to the Brownsville location, Legal Hand centers now operate in Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Jamaica, Queens, with each of the three locations managed by a volunteer coordinator and staffed by non-lawyer volunteers with special training who provide information and guidance to low-income individuals on how to navigate the court and social services system, and how to protect and represent themselves in a legal matter.

The Legal Hand Brownsville Center volunteers, who come from a range of backgrounds and reflect the rich diversity of the community, must undergo substantive training focusing on areas where emergencies commonly arise, such as housing, physical safety, immigration, family matters and benefits. Their training also covers cultural competency, interviewing skills, the limits on the advice non-lawyer volunteers are legally permitted to provide and the availability of referrals to other services, including full legal representation.

The Brownsville site is equipped with computers, Internet access, printers and the full array of online legal tools for the self-represented. To accommodate residents' varying schedules, it has Saturday and evening hours in addition to regular business hours. The Legal Hand Brownsville Center, along with its counterparts in Crown Heights and Jamaica, Queens, were launched with the support of a \$1 million grant from an anonymous donor.

“By optimizing available neighborhood resources, the Legal Hand initiative is working to bridge barriers between the justice system and historically underserved communities like Brownsville. While representation by an attorney is always ideal, the assistance of a trained non-lawyer to provide basic information and support can make a meaningful difference to those struggling with housing, consumer debt, immigration and other urgent matters, helping prevent more serious legal problems and leading to better outcomes. I commend the Center for Court Innovation, New York's Permanent Commission on Access to Justice and our other Legal Hand partners for their leadership and collaboration on the launch of this innovative endeavor aimed at narrowing the state's justice gap,” said Chief Judge DiFiore.

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