



PRESS RELEASE

New York State
Unified Court System

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Chief Judge Lippman Announces Launch of Legal Hand: Neighborhood Legal Information Centers to Help Close New York's Justice Gap

*Network of Walk-in Storefronts Will Be First of Its Kind in New York
and the Nation to Bring Basic Legal Information, Assistance
and Support to Residents in Low-Income Communities*

NEW YORK — Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman today announced a singular new program that will bring a corps of trained community volunteers to storefront locations in our most vulnerable neighborhoods, offering free legal information, assistance and referrals to residents grappling with legal problems relating to the very basics of life.

Among a series of innovative measures implemented by the New York State court system to narrow New York's justice gap, the new Legal Hand initiative builds upon the success of the court system's "Navigators" program, which was launched last year and utilizes rigorously trained volunteer non-lawyers 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 will make such assistance readily available to people where they live, eliminating one of the biggest obstacles to access to justice for the indigent and those of modest means — distance.

Despite all the good work done in recent years to address the justice gap in New York and around the country, people fighting for the necessities of life are still turned away by civil legal services providers more often than they are helped, as there simply are not enough resources and lawyers. Under Judge Lippman's leadership, the court system has worked vigorously to push the boundaries in seeking new solutions to broaden access to justice in civil matters, most recently looking to the role that trained community volunteers can play in helping to close the justice gap. Undoubtedly, representation by an attorney is always optimal, but the aid of a trained non-lawyer to provide basic information and support — such as how to access and use online legal resources — can help reduce delays and prevent more serious legal issues.

The new Legal Hand program, developed in collaboration with Helaine Barnett, the chair of New York's Permanent Commission on Access to Justice, will be run by the Center for Court Innovation in conjunction with three legal services providers: the Legal Aid Society, Legal Services NYC, and New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). The first Legal Hand center in Crown Heights, Brooklyn has already opened its doors, and two more locations in Brownsville, Brooklyn and Jamaica, Queens will be opening in the next several weeks. Each Legal Hand will be managed by a volunteer coordinator and staffed with trained volunteers to 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. A legal services attorney will also be on-site to help train and aid volunteers.

Legal Hand volunteers will receive substantive training focusing on areas where emergencies commonly arise, such as housing, physical safety, immigration, family matters and benefits. Training will also cover 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. Periodic training will continue throughout each volunteer's tenure. Volunteers come from a wide spectrum of backgrounds including retirees, college students, long-time residents and individuals new to the community. Volunteers who have already signed up and received training in the Crown Heights location reflect the diversity of the community they serve and include many with second language capabilities.

The Legal Hand centers are established in easy-to-find locations and have weekend and evening hours to accommodate 9:00 to 5:00 employees and others. The location in Crown Heights is a stand-alone location, while the Brownsville center is housed in the same building as

Community Solutions, a non-profit aimed at ending homelessness, and the Jamaica center is co-located with Community Mediation Services. The Brownsville and Jamaica Legal Hand centers will be able to draw from the volunteer pools of these established community organizations. The Legal Hand centers will be equipped with computers, Internet access, printers and the full array of online legal tools for the self-represented, with volunteers on hand to provide assistance in completing online legal forms, drafting form letters and using technological tools designed to address consumer credit problems and other legal issues. The Legal Hand Centers are supported by a \$1 million grant from an anonymous donor.

“When people are in trouble, they do not immediately look to the courthouse for assistance. Our goal with the Legal Hand Centers is to break down barriers between the community and the justice system and to demystify some of the simple steps people can take to protect their rights under the law. This will lead to more just outcomes, more crises averted, less litigation, and money savings for our state and local governments. Most important, the centers will contribute greatly in transforming the ideal of equal justice into a reality in New York,” said Judge Lippman. “I am grateful to Helaine Barnett, the visionary chair of our Permanent Commission on Access to Justice, for coming to me with the idea for this localized, creative approach to help close the state’s justice gap, to the Center for Court Innovation for its commitment to developing community-driven projects that provide meaningful access to justice, and to the legal services providers and court system for their ongoing support on this critical endeavor. I also want to express our tremendous gratitude to our generous donor.”

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