

# Northwest Justice Project

## Annual Report 2011

**Our Mission:** To secure justice through high quality legal advocacy that promotes the long-term well-being of low-income individuals, families and communities.





**Throughout 2011, NJP's dedicated staff and our equal justice partners responded to urgent, emerging problems affecting low-income families and individuals across the state and maintained high levels of day-to-day services despite reduced staffing.**

Dear Friends, Colleagues and Supporters –

It is with a great deal of pride that I present the Northwest Justice Project's Annual Report for 2011. Our Annual Report illustrates the critical ways in which NJP promotes healthy, safe and economically stable communities and responded to the worsening conditions facing low-income people in Washington last year through innovative partnerships. As importantly, NJP's Annual Report reflects the ways in which we furthered our mission of promoting the long-term well-being of individuals, families and communities through legal assistance that combats injustice, and educates and empowers our client communities.

State and federally funded civil legal assistance to those unable to afford counsel has a profound impact on the lives of those served. Last year, NJP's services reached more than thirty thousand low-income Washingtonians seeking help to address basic human needs such as access to health care, family safety, protecting one's home, and economic security. At the same time, NJP's vital partnerships with the Washington State Bar Association, SeaMar Community Health Centers, Equal Justice Works-AmeriCorps (Corporation for Community Service), Veteran service providers, domestic violence victim services and other legal aid providers, among others, allowed us to provide essential services in areas of emerging needs and to reach communities otherwise unable to access our system of justice.

Our work in 2011 again made clear that it is the most at risk in our society – our children, the elderly, the infirm and disabled, the uneducated, the socially and economically exploited – who suffer the most when legal aid services are not available. I salute NJP's dedicated staff who, despite funding losses and reductions in staffing affecting virtually every component of NJP's services, responded to urgent and emerging problems affecting communities across the state and maintained high levels of day-to-day services. So too, NJP's efforts are an integral aspect of the work of the Alliance for Equal Justice, Washington's network of staffed legal aid specialty and volunteer attorney programs – and dedicated supporters – who make up Washington's coordinated civil legal aid delivery system.

Thank you for your continued support.

César E. Torres, Executive Director



PHOTO BY ALLISON DURAZZI

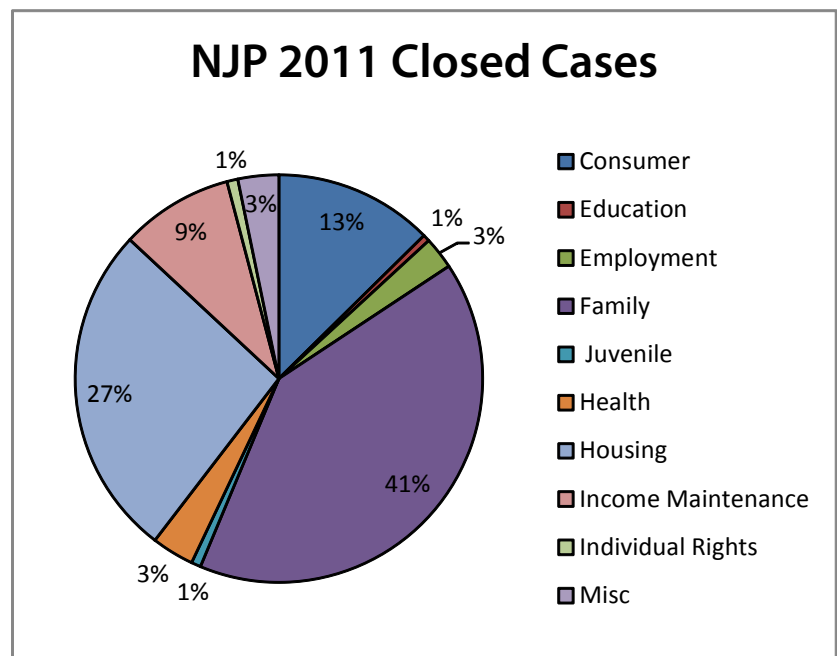


# NORTHWEST JUSTICE PROJECT

NJP is Washington's largest publicly funded legal aid program and serves as a highly integrated statewide law firm providing a full range of free civil legal assistance and representation to low-income individuals, families and communities in cases affecting fundamental human needs. NJP's principal funders are the Washington Office of Civil Legal Aid and the federal Legal Services Corporation. Significant funding support is also provided by the Washing State Bar Association, through an Office of Attorney General *cy pres* grant, and other grants and contracts. In the face of escalating need, and despite significant funding reductions, in 2011 NJP handled more than 16,500 cases serving nearly 36,000 Washingtonians. NJP is a proud member of the Alliance for Equal Justice, a network of legal aid programs and supporters that leverages public funds and mobilizes volunteer attorneys and specialized legal aid services across the state.

In response to social service cut backs, increasing poverty and client demand, NJP handled 60% more cases involving health benefits for at risk clients and increased foreclosure representation in 2011, despite significant funding reduction.

2011 NJP Funding	
LSC	\$ 6,567,018
OCLA	\$ 10,752,008
WSBA	\$ 508,526
Other	\$ 2,205,757
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 20,033,309</b>



**CLEAR:** At the heart of NJP's service delivery infrastructure is our largest office, a statewide toll-free hotline providing intake screening, legal advice, limited assistance and referral to volunteer attorneys and NJP offices. On average, each CLEAR advocate handles 700 cases per year.

**REGIONAL OFFICES:** NJP has 17 regional field offices that provide extended legal advocacy and representation in the most pressing and difficult cases facing low-income persons across the state. Regional offices coordinate services with other providers, support local volunteer attorney programs, and engage in community legal education efforts. NJP also has a specialized Native American Unit, a Farm Worker Unit, and a Foreclosure Prevention Unit.

**WASHINGTONLAWHELP.ORG:** NJP promotes the effective and efficient administration of justice by maintaining a legal self-help center containing hundreds of legal resources, forms and instructions (in multiple languages) and using new technologies, and educational videos to help the thousands of persons who each day are forced to turn to our courts without legal representation.

## PROMOTING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

**Eight-year old Amy has a neurodevelopment disorder that prevents her from speaking or using her hands to communicate.** Her doctors prescribed an eye-tracking device that measures a series of blinks and gazes in order to communicate her wants, feelings, and medical needs. Amy's family struggled for a year and succeeded in securing DSHS and the Health Care Authority approval for the manufacture and installation of a speech-generating device, only to have the process completely derailed at the last minute. NJP took up the case and represented the family over several months to ensure the Health Care Authority delivered on its responsibility to Amy and her family. The family's diligent advocacy and NJP's assistance truly changed the family's life, and made justice a reality for Amy.



**After a 40 year work history, 60 year-old Sarah became ill, lost her job, and her medical insurance coverage.** Specialists had determined that with treatment she could recover and she knew she could return to work. Untreated, she endured great pain and ongoing complications. She exhausted her savings, her other resources, and lost her home - a relative took her in. Sarah applied for state Disability Lifeline benefits but was denied because her projected recovery time was less than the 90 days "duration of disability" requirement. Sarah appealed and with NJP's advocacy secured a settlement permitting her to have the needed surgeries and Sarah looks forward to getting back to work after recovery.

**In 2011, Washington drastically cut and replaced Disability Lifeline, a state program that provides subsistence benefits for hundreds of persons with severe disabilities living on the very brink of survival.**

**Before suffering serious injuries from a fall, Albert had worked all his life and loved his highly skilled, heavy labor work.** He also developed lung problems, caused in part by workplace exposure to dust and fumes. His Worker's Compensation claim was unsuccessful. He soon found himself homeless, couch-surfing in friends' homes, and his health problems worsened. He suffered a heart attack, resulting in reduced cardiac functioning, and was diagnosed with emphysema. To complicate matters, all his life Albert had hidden that he is almost totally illiterate, unable even to write down a phone number correctly, as a result of severe dyslexia. Albert applied for Disability Lifeline benefits and was denied. NJP successfully represented Albert on his appeal and Albert was approved for benefits with an accurate assessment identifying all of his medical needs.





## PROMOTING SAFE COMMUNITIES

**Edith was shocked when she learned that her two young grandchildren were suffering severe neglect at the hands of their drug addicted parents.** The older child was behind in his shots, had significant speech delays and such serious dental issues that hospitalization was considered. NJP helped Edith secure temporary custody of the children. Edith immediately enrolled the older child in speech and occupational therapy, and special education services. Edith now has permanent custody after the mother agreed; their respective fathers are incarcerated. Edith reports that the children are doing well in her care.



**Tom's eleven year old son was suffering emotional and physical abuse at the hands of his step-father and Tom was unable to protect him.** NJP represented Tom to petition for a domestic violence protection order. In court the step-father admitted to hitting the child and calling him names, so the court placed the child and his younger sister with Tom. Tom and the mother then agreed to a permanent parenting plan that prohibits the step-father from having any contact with the children.

**"The NJP lawyer was professional, resourceful, and had the skills and experience to deal with abusive men like my ex-husband...she went out of her way to make it right."**

**Domestic Violence Client**



**Ruth, a senior with Parkinson's disease, allowed her son to move into her home to help him get his life on track.** The son became verbally and psychologically abusive to Ruth and to a series of girlfriends he moved into the home. After a particularly violent incident, Ruth called the police, but incredibly she was arrested, jailed and a criminal no-contact order was put in place that did not allow her to go near her home. Ruth slept in her car in the parking lot at the Veterans Home, where staff helped her contact NJP. NJP's Spokane office immediately obtained a civil protection order requiring the police to remove the son from Ruth's home and prevented him from having any further contact with her. Less than three business days after opening Ruth's case, Ruth was sleeping in her own bed and the criminal charges had been dismissed.

**Marianne, a victim of domestic violence, was desperate to get her ten year old child back from his abusive father.** Even though the father had no contact with the child for several years and a highly restrictive parenting plan was in place, the father kidnapped the child and fled across the state, leaving Marianne with no contact with the child for over year. NJP attorneys collaborated across the state to obtain an order directing the Spokane Sheriff to retrieve the child from the father's custody and bring them both to the courthouse at which time the court ordered the child's immediate return to Marianne. Once reunited, Marianne and the child returned home together.



## PROMOTING ECONOMICALLY STABLE COMMUNITIES



**Sam and Martha, an elderly couple, contacted NJP when their mobile home park's new management imposed rent increases, added fees and tried to strong-arm residents into signing a new lease with substantially different terms.** NJP's CLEAR Sr. coordinated with the Office of the Attorney General to demand the park owner rescind the rent increases, fees and lease changes as illegal under state law. The park owners ultimately agreed, allowing the residents to remain under the pre-existing terms. The residents have since formed an active home owner's association to educate themselves on their legal rights and to negotiate with the park owners on a more even playing field.

**Robert, who suffers from mental illness, endured a long period of homelessness, but he was working to transition to his own apartment.** Several months of back Social Security benefits were deposited into his bank account. Just then, a Portland collection agency garnished the account and took the funds. NJP informed the collection agency that the funds were legally exempt from collection and filed proof with the court. When the agency and its attorney misrepresented that the garnishment was removed, NJP partnered with a local private attorney and sued for violations of federal and state laws protecting consumers from unlawful collection practices. A quick settlement allowed Robert to secure decent, safe housing, and stopped the abusive collection practices.



**NJP's King County office sued the owner of a 239 unit apartment complex for discriminating against tenants with Section 8 vouchers. The suit prevented the displacement of hundreds of families, and preserved scarce affordable housing.**



**Twenty-one families became homeless when the Fire Marshall condemned the building where they lived after numerous notices to the landlord.** The families were given fifteen minutes to pack what they could carry and leave. The landlord failed to secure the building and many of the tenants' possessions were lost or stolen. NJP quickly sued for a temporary restraining order requiring the landlord to secure the tenants' possessions and to pay for their cost of having to relocate. The landlord immediately secured the possessions and agreed to pay the tenants' relocation expenses. As a result of NJP's quick action, the tenants received funds to secure new homes and avoid continued homelessness.

**Michael, a Yakima homeowner, contacted NJP in desperation as his home was scheduled to be sold at a foreclosure the very next day.** He was facing foreclosure because he lost his job due to several disabling health problems, but had recently been approved for Social Security Disability (SSDI) benefits. Even though his SSDI award and back benefits would make it possible for him to pay the amounts owed and reinstate his loan, the bank and foreclosure trustee refused to delay the sale. NJP's Foreclosure Prevention Unit immediately intervened and stopped the sale. Once Michael received his SSDI benefits, he paid the arrears and saved his home.

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# PARTNERSHIPS FOR EQUAL JUSTICE

**HOME FORECLOSURE LEGAL AID PROJECT:** The Washington State Bar Association (WSBA) has helped lead Washington's response to the foreclosure crisis by mobilizing the private bar to provide pro bono assistance to affected families. In 2011 WSBA supported the creation of NJP's statewide Foreclosure Prevention Unit.

**PARTNERS** – WSBA/Volunteer Attorneys/Minority & Specialty Bar Associations, Office of the Attorney General; Housing Finance Commission & Housing Counselors; Equal Justice Works-AmeriCorps.

**HIGHLIGHTS** – In its first six months, the WSBA/FPU effort assessed 695 homeowners, opening 514 cases. More than \$1.3 million in homeowner equity was preserved, and fair market values preserved totaled \$18 million. Special outreach and homeowner fairs were conducted in minority and LEP communities.

**MEDICAL LEGAL PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN:** Focuses on the legal needs that impact children's health and well-being and provides a significant expansion of client access to NJP services by training health care providers and clinic staff to screen for legal issues.

**PARTNERS** - Seattle Children's Hospital; Odessa Brown Clinic; Harborview Pediatric Clinic; Sea Mar Community Health Centers; and Equal Justice Works-AmeriCorps.

**HIGHLIGHTS** – Used GIS technology to show lack of health care in South King County, led to development of a new health clinic; Won federal court order halting emergency rule that would have substantially reduced disability benefits for children.

**INTEGRATED RURAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT:** Provides comprehensive legal assistance to marginalized immigrant victims of domestic violence in a highly rural, geographically isolated five-county region of north central Washington.

**PARTNERS** - Northwest Immigrant Rights Project; New Hope and The Support Center (domestic violence victim service providers).

**HIGHLIGHTS** – Community outreach efforts revealed failure of county law enforcement entities to provide "certifications of assistance" needed by U Visa applicants. Project trained law enforcement personnel, judges and prosecuting attorneys on the unique impacts of domestic violence for immigrant women, resulting in heightened law enforcement reporting of U Visa certification.

**HOMELESS VETERANS PROJECT:** Provides legal assistance to homeless and at-risk veterans to address barriers to employment and stability, significantly expanding NJP's internal capacity to assist veterans.

**PARTNERS** – WSBA Legal Assistance to Military Personnel (LAMP) Section, King County Veterans Program, Department of Veteran Affairs (WA), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Equal Justice Works-AmeriCorps, Homeless Shelters.

**HIGHLIGHTS** – The partnership has dramatically enhanced the level of awareness and service coordination between veteran servicing entities and legal aid services across the Puget Sound Region. A recent referral involved a disabled Vietnam veteran on suicide watch. The VA terminated benefits because of a ten year-old warrant and sought repayment of almost \$60,000. He was homeless, without any income, and unable to work. The Veteran's Project successfully quashed the warrant, reinstated the disability benefits, and recovered \$7,000 in back benefits.

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