

Legal Services of New Jersey Launches a New Project to Provide Civil Legal Assistance to Victims of Human Trafficking

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Human trafficking, also known as trafficking in persons or modern-day slavery, is the illegal trade or use of a person against their will, for the purpose of forced labor or sexual exploitation. Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) recently launched a major new state initiative, PROTECT, to provide holistic and comprehensive civil legal assistance to low income victims of human trafficking. LSNJ is the coordinating body for the statewide legal services system which has presence in all 21 counties and provides free civil legal assistance to indigent persons. The project serves both U.S. citizens and non-citizens, regardless of immigration status, as well as minor victims of human trafficking who have been victimized by both sex and labor traffickers.

Human trafficking, encompassing both sex and labor trafficking, affects individuals from diverse backgrounds in all parts of New Jersey, urban as well as rural. While there is no single profile of a trafficking victim, encompassing both U.S. citizens and foreign nationals, traffickers tend to prey on individuals who are poor, vulnerable, and living in unsafe and unstable situations. Some of the most at-risk individuals for human trafficking include persons with disabilities, LGBTQ individuals, undocumented migrants, runaway and homeless youth, victims of child sex abuse, and temporary guest workers. Some of the same traits or characteristics that can make a person with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (I/DDs) vulnerable to victimization in general, can also put them at risk to be victimized by sex and labor traffickers.

On April 1, the program began taking calls on a new toll-free hotline just for trafficking victim- 1-844-576-5776 (1-844-LSNJ PROTECT). The Hotline also accepts calls directly from referral agencies calling on a victim's behalf. The PROTECT hotline provides victims with comprehensive, holistic legal assistance in the areas of family law, immigration, public benefits, expungement (clearing their criminal record), vacating prostitution convictions that stem from being a victim of sex trafficking, healthcare access, employment and wage theft claims and housing, among others. It supports victims dealing with the criminal justice system as either a victim or a defendant and assists with victim advocacy.

PROTECT, financed with state and federal victim assistance grants, has a core staff of four attorneys and two paralegals, who have a range of experience in family law, domestic violence, immigration law, criminal defense, and criminal prosecution. The attorneys will counsel, and where possible, also represent victims in *any* civil legal matter they are facing. While our conversations with clients are required to be confidential, we are happy to receive initial calls to our hotline from service providers, law enforcement, parents or other concerned individuals/agencies to first establish contact with LSNJ PROTECT, to the extent that the victim wishes and consents.

PROTECT also ensures that victims are provided with critical social services to obtain food, housing, transportation, medical services, education and life skills training through the support of LSNJ's Social Work Unit. The project also engages in public education, training and outreach to providers of other services to trafficking victims, government agencies, law enforcement, healthcare facilities and other members of the public on civil legal remedies that are available. To learn more visit, visit the Human Trafficking page at lsnjlaw.org

(<https://www.lsnjlaw.org/Victims-of-Crime/Human-Trafficking/Pages/default.aspx>) or contact us through the PROTECT Hotline (1-844-576-5776).