

RHODE ISLAND LEGAL SERVICES

# 2016 ANNUAL REPORT

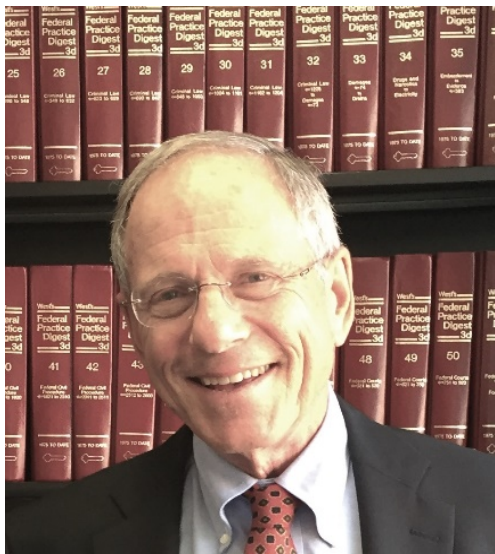
**Family Safety**



Rhode Island  
**LEGAL SERVICES**



America's Partner For Equal Justice



Michael R. Goldenberg  
Chairman of the Board of Directors

## The Chairman's Message

Established in 1969, Rhode Island Legal Services Inc. is our state's full service non-profit law firm providing free legal aid to low-income residents, to victims of domestic violence and to seniors. Our mission is to provide legal advice and representation to eligible clients "promoting self-reliance, ending domestic violence, preventing homelessness, affording dignity to all people, and reaching out to groups with added burdens on their ability to access the civil justice system." We strive to provide each of our clients with **access to justice** by representing each client individually, professionally and zealously.

Our strength is our talented and competent full-time staff of more than two dozen lawyers and legal assistants, up-to-date technology, and dedicated and experienced management oversight. We work with others, including the Rhode Island Bar Association's Volunteer Lawyer Program, government agencies, social work organizations, community action groups and law-school affiliated poverty law providers and law student interns. RILS lawyers regularly share their specialized poverty law expertise with other lawyers by participating as instructors in continuing legal education programs. Although today we are substantially the largest provider of legal services to Rhode Island's indigent population, the increasing needs of those eligible for our services exceed our capacity.

In its early years, RILS was financed primarily by the federal Legal Services Corporation and by the Rhode Island Bar Foundation through IOLTA funds. With the real estate recession and the decline in IOLTA funds, RILS now relies primarily on the Legal Service Corporation, other federal and state government support, private foundations and individual contributions. Facing potential cuts from federal funding sources, we will increasingly rely on financial support from the bar and the community.

I am proud to have served for many years as a director, officer and finally for the past two years as Chairman of this organization. My job has been made easier by our Executive Director and President, Robert Barge, who has been a steady, innovative and a constant advocate for RILS and its clientele. I am confident that with your support, RILS will continue to deliver quality pro bono legal services, to enhance the functioning of the courts and to strengthen the fabric of our community.

# Rhode Island Legal Services

## Working to Increase Access to Justice



Robert M. Barge, Esq.  
Executive Director

RILS is an integral part of the civil justice system providing high quality legal assistance and representation to more than five thousand low-income individuals and families each year. Our mission is both access to justice and antipoverty in nature promoting family stabilization by helping families escape poverty.

While we represent clients in a wide variety of civil legal matters, our work is focused in seven priority areas including: 1) Safe Affordable Housing; 2) Income Maintenance and Food; 3) Affordable Health Care; 4) Family Safety; 5) Family Preservation; 6) Financial Stability; and 7) High Quality Appropriate Education.

An investment of an additional \$3.67 Million in Rhode Island Legal Services, Inc., will improve access to the civil justice system, for low income families, veterans, and senior citizens and: 1) create jobs and reduce unemployment; 2) increase the efficiency of the Rhode District Court and Rhode Island Family Court; 3) provide access to justice for Newport County residents; 4) preserve properties from foreclosure; 5) prevent homelessness; 6) help seniors; and 7) assist our veterans to secure the benefits to which they are entitled.

***Let's begin with two projects that will increase access to justice for pro se litigants in family and housing matters.***

At a cost of \$537,766 RILS can address the Pro Se problem in the Rhode Island Family Court. This would allow RILS to hire four attorneys and secretarial support. The Pro Se problem denies low income people without representation equal access to justice; places additional demands on court staff and services; negatively impacts opposing counsel's time and efficiency by frequently requiring delays occasioned by interacting with and waiting for pro se litigants; and decreases court efficiency as a result of the logjam pro se litigants create in the courtroom.

Similarly, with an investment of \$485,317, the RILS Housing Law Center will secure housing rights, defend tenants facing eviction, resolve related landlord-tenant matters and prevent homelessness.

"Equal justice under law is not merely a caption on the facade of the Supreme Court building, it is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of the ends for which our entire legal system exists...it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status."

*U.S. Supreme Court Justice  
Lewis Powell, Jr.*

## The Champlin Foundation Awards Grant to Upgrade Office Space



Keith Lang, Executive Director of the Champlin Foundation and Michael R. Goldenberg, Chairman RILS Board of Directors

In November of 2016 the Champlin Foundation awarded Rhode Island Legal Services, Inc. a \$100,000 grant to improve its office space. RILS will paint, carpet and update its two kitchens. Rhode Island Legal Services owns the fourth and fifth floors of the Hanley. The 15,000 sq. ft. of office space houses the staff of 37 and a host of volunteers.

In November of 2014, The Champlin Foundation awarded RILS a grant in the amount of \$39,600 for the purpose of making office space improvements and to purchase computers. The new computer equipment included Surface 2 Tablets for advocacy staff to facilitate remote desktop access to their desktop, email, network and case management system. The Tablets have gotten rave reviews from attorneys.

## The Kresge Foundation Continues Its Support of the Holistic Legal Assistance Network



Sandra M. Ambrozy, Senior Program Officer

The Kresge Foundation continues to support the Holistic Legal Assistance Network (HLAN) with a \$400,000 grant to continue the highly acclaimed project for 29 months, until December 31, 2018. This innovative project, the Holistic Legal Assistance Network (HLAN) established an interdisciplinary team of legal, financial and social service providers. The team will assist 600 families over the grant period in resolving their legal problems and establishing financial stability.





# LOW INCOME TAXPAYER CLINIC



Elizabeth Segovis, Esq.  
Director LITC

The Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) is designed to meet the needs of low-income Rhode Islanders who are experiencing difficulties with the IRS. RILS is able to assist low-income Rhode Island taxpayers, including those for whom English is a Second Language, to obtain fair and equitable treatment in disputes with the Internal Revenue Service, and favorable resolution of their controversies with the IRS.

Two components comprise the LITC clinic. The outreach component is focused on education for those for whom English is a second language. The second component of the program is a controversy component focused on audits and representation of tax court and collection cases involving the Earned Income Tax Credit.

## THE CASE OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS TRUST

Our clients established a trust for their adult disabled child. Later, they were advised by their tax preparer that the trust they had previously established did not qualify as a special needs trust. As a result, they had paid taxes on the trust income. When contacted by the clients, LITC staff researched the issue and determined that the trust was indeed a special needs trust and as such, qualified for a higher exemption. The LITC assisted the clients in the preparation and filing of an amended trust tax returns. The taxes paid erroneously for the past three years were returned to our clients.



## PUBLIC BENEFITS GROUP

The Public Benefits Group provides legal assistance to prevent the loss of a client's income and to obtain and preserve Medical Assistance (MA) and Medicaid benefits for eligible clients. The Public Benefits Group also offers community advocacy and client representation in denials or terminations of government benefits in the administrative tribunals and appellate courts. Thousands of Rhode Islanders depend on Rhode Island Works, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, General Public Assistance (GPA), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, unemployment compensation, Social Security benefits or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). It is important that we continue to provide legal support to low-income clients so that we can preserve their income, enabling them to purchase basic necessities such as food and clothing, and secure their access to proper health care.

# Partners Overcoming Domestic Violence Mentoring Project



The provision of direct legal representation of victims of domestic violence continues to be the primary focus of the Safe Family Project. Despite their substantial efforts however, the need for legal representation in the area of domestic violence remains great. In response to this unmet need, RILS attorneys played a pivotal role in launching the Partners Overcoming Domestic Violence Mentoring Project (PODV) in February of 2016.

The PODV is a new and innovative legal mentoring program, designed to provide direct representation to domestic violence survivors in their divorce or custody/visitation cases, while introducing and guiding new and seasoned, (but not in Family Law), attorneys through the complexities of this critical area of law. This project is a unique community collaboration integrating legal, advocacy, and social services to provide long-term legal solutions which break the cycle of violence and empower survivors to build safe and stable lives for themselves and their children.

Divorce and custody/visitation cases involving issues of domestic violence are identified by the Rhode Island Bar Association's Volunteer Lawyer Program (VLP), and referred to the PODV. Upon referral into the program, the case is assigned to a volunteer legal team, which consists of an experienced family law attorney, who will closely mentor a pair of volunteer attorneys, as they provide individual representation to the client. Each client will also be referred to a domestic violence advocate who will be available to provide critical support services and safety planning.



Volunteer Mentors from the first PODV class

To participate in the program, a volunteer attorney agrees to undergo twelve hours of Continuing Legal Education training and to take one or two PODV cases which are accepted via the Volunteer Lawyer Program. The PODV's first class consisted of seventeen volunteer attorneys and seven mentors. The first all day training program was offered at the Rhode Island Bar Association in February 2016. The seventeen volunteer attorneys were presented with a comprehensive program that included a presentation about domestic violence by the Executive Director of the RICADV and several private and RILS' attorneys. The final training was held on a Saturday in a courtroom of the Family Court, and the group was welcomed and encouraged by Chief Justice Michael B. Forte. The PODV's first class has been a huge success and many more are planned in the near future.



*PODV First Class*

## SAFE FAMILY PROJECT

### Protecting victims of violence

The project attorneys provide full legal representation, primarily in Domestic Abuse Restraining Orders. Depending on the facts of the case, they may also advise and assist the client to pursue a divorce, a permanent child custody order, or a visitation schedule. When appropriate, the Safe Family Project advocates refer clients to RILS' Public Benefits Group, Consumer Debt Group, or Housing Law Center and Foreclosure Prevention Project for additional assistance with their ongoing problems.

The primary focus of the Project is to provide for and promote the safety of families through the advice, referral and/or representation of victims of domestic violence in Family Court restraining orders, custody, and divorce cases. In addition, Project staff also represent current RILS clients seeking a custody order or divorce in Family Court where the representation is necessary to facilitate a resolution of an existing legal matter for which another RILS Program (e.g. DCYF) represents the client.



Bridgette Louro, Supervising Attorney  
Safe Family Project



# 2016 EQUAL JUSTICE CELEBRATION





# ROGER WILLIAMS PARK CASINO



Executive Director Robert Barge presenting the Equal Justice Award to Mayor Jorge Elorza



Judge Edward Clifton (Retired) with his brother Judge William Clifton



Senator Erin Lynch Prata being presented the Equal Justice Award by Senator William Conley



Judge Edward Clifton Accepting the Equal Justice Award

# HOUSING LAW CENTER & FORECLOSURE PREVENTION PROJECT

Rhode Island Legal Services provides substantial legal assistance in the housing area including: providing advice and representation to clients in eviction matters; challenging the denial of admission to public and subsidized housing; delivering legal education programs in the community; and working with low-income tenant groups to preserve and/or develop subsidized housing.



In addition, funding from the Rhode Island Bar Foundation's Bank of America Settlement and the National Mortgage Settlement Agreement, the Project undertakes a broad spectrum of legal activities to assist borrowers impacted by the foreclosure crisis and to bring impact litigation challenging unlawful foreclosure and origination and servicing practices. Furthermore, the staff of the Foreclosure Prevention Project litigate common mortgage-related issues and use bankruptcy as an additional strategy for home preservation. Major litigation of pre- and post-foreclosure impact issues is envisioned.

RILS' Foreclosure Project staff will also represent tenants affected by foreclosure; educate borrowers and tenants who reside in foreclosed properties about their legal rights and help develop new initiatives to keep defaulting borrowers and tenants who reside in foreclosed properties in their homes.



# THE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY LEGAL CORPS.

The Equal Opportunity Legal Corps, funded in part by Americorps, continued its work in 2016 removing barriers to employment for economically disadvantaged Rhode Islanders. Americorps Fellows, Brian Furgal and La Tri-c-ea McClendon-Hunt worked to remove barriers to employment by expunging and sealing criminal records, restoring drivers and occupational licenses and repairing poor credit.



In 2016, with funding from AmeriCorps Equal Justice Works, the Employment Opportunity Legal Corps sealed, expunged or corrected 92 criminal records. The Project's advocates seek to empower clients to seek employment and help end poverty one person at a time.

The AmeriCorps Fellows and law students that comprise the Employment Opportunity Legal Corps provide legal assistance, including legal advice and counsel, brief service and direct legal representation to their clients. These efforts are focused on removing legal barriers to employment including but not limited to, the expungement of minor criminal records or sealing under state or federal law, and correction of errors in criminal records.

EOLC Fellows LaTri-c-ea McClendon-Hunt and Brian Furgal and RILS Staff LITC Director Elizabeth Segovis and HLAN Supervising Attorney Nora Salomon at Operation Stand Down



## THE MISSION

*Rhode Island Legal Services provides high quality legal assistance and representation to low-income individuals and eligible client groups for the purpose of improving their economic condition and overall wellbeing by protecting and enforcing legal rights, stabilizing the family unit and communities where clients live, promoting self-reliance, ending domestic violence, preventing homelessness, affording dignity to all people, and reaching out to groups with added burdens on their ability to access the civil justice system.*

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## RILS 2016 Staff Members

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Elizabeth Segovis, Esq., Director of Training  
Denise Aiken, Esq., Supervising Attorney  
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Barbara Czarnecki, Legal Assistant  
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Leslie Kolb, Legal Assistant  
Veronika Kot, Esq., Staff Attorney  
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Juan Lopez, Legal Assistant  
Bridgette Louro, Esq., Supervising Attorney  
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Linda Perrotta, Legal Assistant, Newport  
Shanna Pitts, Esq., Staff Attorney  
Cheryl Randall, File Clerk  
Owen Rice, Esq., Staff Attorney  
Nora Salomon, Esq., Supervising Attorney  
Lia Stuhlsatz, Esq., Supervising Attorney  
Charles Wilson, Technology Consultant  
Michael Zabelin, Esq., Staff Attorney

# RHODE ISLAND LEGAL SERVICES

## WORK GROUPS

*Low Income Taxpayer Clinic*

*Financial Stability Group*

*Family Preservation Project*

*Education Law Project*

*Responsible Parent Project*

*Employment Opportunity Legal Corps*

*Safe Family Project*

*Volunteer Lawyer Program*

*Housing Law Center*

*Public Benefits Group*

*Foreclosure Prevention Project*



## **5,578 Closed Cases in 2016**

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<b>Consumer Debt:</b>	<b>389 Cases</b>
<b>Family:</b>	<b>767 Cases</b>
<b>Education:</b>	<b>85 Cases</b>
<b>Employment:</b>	<b>268 Cases</b>
<b>Health:</b>	<b>196 Cases</b>
<b>Housing:</b>	<b>1024 Cases</b>
<b>Income Maintenance:</b>	<b>671 Cases</b>
<b>Juvenile:</b>	<b>736 Cases</b>
<b>Individual Rights:</b>	<b>281 Cases</b>
<b>Miscellaneous and other:</b>	<b>264 Cases</b>
<b>Volunteer Lawyer Program:</b>	<b>897 Cases</b>

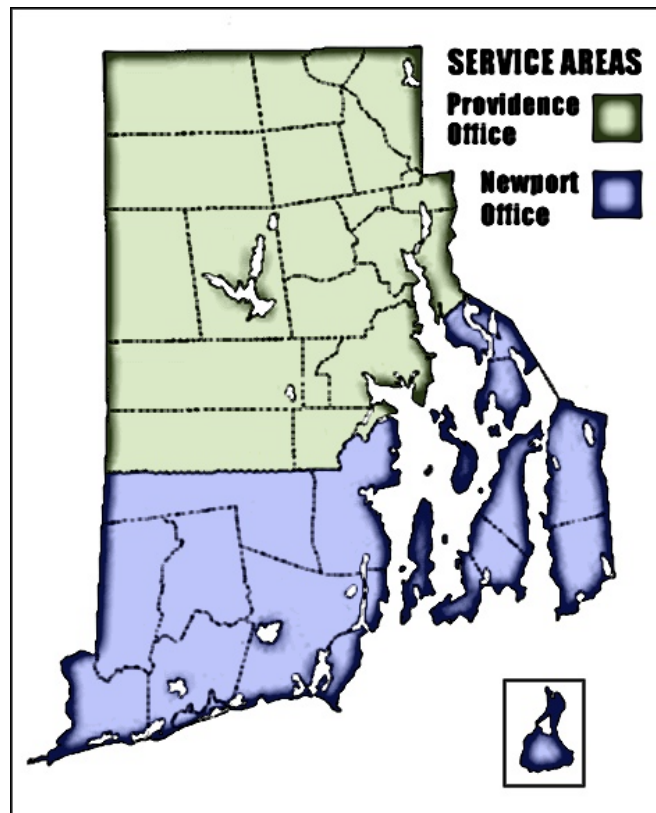
## RILS OFFICES

### Providence

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### Newport

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(800) 637-4529



## RILS WEBSITES

[WWW.RILS.ORG](http://WWW.RILS.ORG)  
[WWW.HELPRILAW.ORG](http://WWW.HELPRILAW.ORG)  
[WWW.LOWINCOMETAXCLINIC.ORG](http://WWW.LOWINCOMETAXCLINIC.ORG)