



# The History of the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York



Legal Aid Society staff in 2012.

**1923** Legal Aid Society of Albany incorporated by city leaders; ends its first year having served 93 clients. Ruth Miner becomes first staff person, salary of \$50 per month. She remained active with the Legal Aid Society for decades, serving on the Board of Directors into the 1960s.

**1923** First Board of Directors:  
Bertram M. Autesesser  
Helen J. Deleahasy  
Leo M. Doody  
Times Union reporter  
Margaret B. Farrell  
Ella A. Gregory  
Hon. William S. Hackett  
Mayor of Albany  
Edmund N. Huyck  
President of the Albany Chamber of Commerce  
Julius Illich  
Judge and Attorney  
Charles H. Johnson  
Susan F. Peck  
William J. Picard  
Reverend Joseph Scully  
Director of Catholic Charities  
George F. Shevlin  
Celia M. Sporborg  
Charles J. Tobin  
Catholic Conference  
Grace N. Whitney

**1923** What else happened in 1923?  
• US Attorney General says women may wear trousers.  
• First nonstop continental flight: New York City to San Diego.  
• Disney Company founded.  
• Cecil B. DeMille debuts the first version of "The Ten Commandments."  
• New York Yankees' Lou Gehrig hits the first of his 493 home runs.

**1930** Judge Julius Illich becomes Vice President and remains as VP through at least 1946. First time Legal Aid handles Domestic Actions.

**1932** Ruth Miner becomes president of the Board and serves on the Board for at least 25 years until 1957.

**1933** Unemployment Insurance becomes the new field of law.

**1934** Arthur J. Harvey becomes attorney for Legal Aid.

**1935** Albany Office located at 82 State Street, 5th Floor.

**1936** First LAS clinic, staffed by Albany Law School students, provides legal services to our clients. First legislative advocacy: a bill sponsored by the LAS to protect against unfair garnishment of wages.

**1937** LAS served 897 clients in "social problems" including family law, landlord tenant, surrogate's court, wage claims and collections. Formal attorney referral process begins with the Albany County Bar Association.

**1939** Arthur Harvey joins the Board of the National Association of Legal Aid Organizations.

**1942** 15% of LAS caseload is for US Servicemen, plus a substantial number of cases for war industry employees.

**1944** "Our Society this year could almost call itself a war agency. Approximately 75% of our time and work is connected with the war effort"  
—From the Annual Report

**1945** LAS sees increase of clients who are WWII Veterans returning home. New caseload of 1120 is the highest ever. In addition, we are consulted in about 180 more cases by war agencies.

**1947** Arthur Harvey successfully defends activist singer Paul Robeson's right to perform at Philip Livingston when the Albany Board of Education attempted to block the performance.

**1947** Original Constitution of the Legal Aid Society  
"The purpose of this Society shall be to assist, in the pursuit of any civil remedy, worthy persons without means who are unable to procure assistance elsewhere."

**1947** The Dynamic Trio:  
The first three directors of the Legal Aid Society in Albany, who led the organization from its inception to 1983: Lawrence Klepper became director in 1966; Ruth Miner took the helm in 1923; and Arthur Harvey served the longest, starting in 1942.

**1947** New board members Mimi Netter and Tom Whalen (later Mayor of Albany) talk with Ann Viglione, new chair of the LAS Board of Directors, in April 1976.

**1947** Legal Aid Society Board Presidents 1976 to present  
Anne Viglione: 1976–1980  
Harry "Skip" Meislahn: 1980–1982  
Roger Kiley: 1982–1984  
Miriam "Mimi" Netter: 1984–1986  
George F. Carpinello: 1986–1988  
Richard C. Heffern: 1988–1989  
Thomas Kenney: 1990–1992  
Philip H. Dixon: 1992–1996  
Keith C. St. John: 1996–1998  
G. Kimball Williams: 1999–2000  
Arthur J. Siegel: 2001–2003  
Peter V. Coffey: 2004–2005  
Jeffrey S. Baker: 2006–2007  
Tim Morrison: 2008–2009  
Amy Klein: 2010–2012  
E. Stewart Jones Jr.: Current

**1957** Col. Frank A. McNamee Jr. (of today's McNamee, Lochner, Titus & Williams) is Vice President of LAS Board. Family and Marital law represents 40% of LAS caseload. LAS recommends that a Small Claims Court be established in the city of Albany.

**1965** Office of Economic Opportunity Legal Services established.

**1966** Economic Opportunity Act expands federal funding and Legal Aid Society becomes one of the earliest beneficiaries. Lawrence Klepper becomes Director of LAS of Albany. Has four attorneys on staff.

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Anne Viglione: 1976–1980  
Harry "Skip" Meislahn: 1980–1982  
Roger Kiley: 1982–1984  
Miriam "Mimi" Netter: 1984–1986  
George F. Carpinello: 1986–1988  
Richard C. Heffern: 1988–1989  
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Jeffrey S. Baker: 2006–2007  
Tim Morrison: 2008–2009  
Amy Klein: 2010–2012  
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**1970** Legal Aid Society has branch offices in Cohoes and Watervliet. Annual budget about \$250,000.

**1973** Legal Aid Society serves its 50,000<sup>th</sup> client in its 50<sup>th</sup> year. Albany City Court Judge Tom Whalen recognized the "warranty of habitability"—that landlords have an obligation to make housing habitable for tenants—in a case brought by LAS staff attorney Lanny Walter. March: Office of Economic Opportunity demise threatens legal services. LAS survives on bank loans and capital accounts.

**1974** Congress passes Legal Service Corporation Act. LAS staff attorneys establish Welfare Advocates, training lay advocates to assist people in obtaining public benefits. Four of the volunteers, Ellen Breslin, Claire Malone, Margie Skimmer and Joann Smith, went on to serve the community in significant ways.

**1976** Legal Service Corporation funding \$92.3 million. Grows to \$321 million by 1981.

**1978** LAS has 11 full time attorneys, 9 paralegals and 8 law students. LAS has offices in Albany and Cohoes; funds LAS in Schenectady and Troy. North Country Legal services opens in Canton and Plattsburgh.

**1981–82** Troy and Schenectady staff move to Albany office. Legal Aid Society of Albany becomes regional provider and is renamed Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York. Opens office in Saratoga Springs. Grows to 19 attorneys and 21 staff.

**1983** Arthur J. Harvey receives the NYS Bar Association's Root Stimson Award. Lawrence Klepper fires himself to save the organization in face of funding cuts. Joel Spitzer becomes Acting Director.

**1985** Director Denison Ray signs the first Union Contract with LASNNY staff.

**1986** Arthur J. Harvey dies in March. According to his obituary, "Harvey was a member, chief counsel, secretary, president and board member of the Legal Aid Society" from 1930 until his death in 1986, all the while working for low income people.

**1988** Saratoga Springs new attorneys in 1980: Edward Lindner, Mary Withington, V. Jerome Luhn. Mary is still an attorney there today.

**1989** LAS receives first Homelessness Prevention Project Funds from Albany County Department of Social Services and New York State.

**1992** LAS and GULP successfully sued to compel Schenectady County DSS to provide timely, sufficient emergency assistance to poor people in need, in compliance with existing law.

**1994–95** Wendy Wahlberg is acting Director.

**1995** Lillian Moy becomes Executive Director.

**1996** LASNNY adds Columbia and Greene counties when Mid Hudson Legal Services closes.

**1997** North Country Legal Services garnered retroactive childhood and adult SSI benefits for a developmentally disabled young adult. The Court found that the client should have been found disabled when his parents first filed the claim. The client was eventually granted disability benefits as an adult.

**1998** LASNNY celebrates its Diamond 75th Anniversary at Peter Kiemann Plaza.

**2002** LASNNY moves into its current fully accessible offices at 55 Colvin Avenue.

**2003** Legal Service Corporation promotes state planning and reconfiguration of Legal Services Programs. Hon. Howard L. Levine receives Equal Justice Award at 80th Anniversary Celebration.

**2003** Wendy Wahlberg, Mary Maguire, Brenda Bertram, Lillian Moy and Art Siegel in front of 55 Columbia St. in early 2002, as they prepare to move to the current office at Colvin Ave.

**2004** LASNNY merges with North Country Legal Services, providing services to Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton and St. Lawrence counties, and also assumes responsibility for Fulton, Montgomery and Schoharie counties, formerly part of Legal Aid Society of Mid New York. Wendy Wahlberg and Peter Racette assume Deputy Directorships. Justice For All Annual Campaign launched by leaders of area law firms: E. Stewart Jones, Jr. and Arthur Siegel, co-chairs.

**2005** LSC issues Documenting the Justice Gap In America, confirming "80% of the civil legal needs of low income Americans are not being met." LAS turns away more than 4,000 eligible applicants due to lack of resources.

**2006** E. Stewart Jones, Jr. and G. Kimball Williams, Co-Chairs of the Justice for All Campaign.

**2007** Legal Aid Endowment Fund is established. Over 33,100 people benefit from LAS information and referral, advice, brief service, full representation and community legal education (in print, in person and on the Internet). Troy home owner Kathleen Roberts, despite diligently making all mortgage payments, was threatened with foreclosure by a company who bought bundled mortgages. When challenged by LASNNY attorney Guinness Gailliard, the unsubstantiated foreclosure was dismissed.

**2008** LASNNY attorney Susan Griskonis advocated for Domestic Violence client Patricia Miller, obtaining a divorce and restraining order against her abusive and harassing husband.

**2012** Ghana native Charles Badu had applied for US naturalization and joined the US Air Force Reserve, when a technical glitch resulted in deportation hearings. LASNNY attorney Brian Wang succeeded in having citizenship granted under a special provision that allows for naturalization of active duty military.



Ruth Miner, Legal Aid's first attorney (9th from left) at the National Meeting of Legal Aid Attorneys in 1930.



"Through its work [the Legal Aid Society] is making sound citizens of a large number of people. To know at first hand the result of your labors is an inspiration. The young men from this school whom the Society has permitted to assist it under its attorneys are warm in their appreciation of the opportunities given them for service. The Society brings helpful results in cases in which its clients' property, character, happiness and even liberty are involved. It is bound to grow in good works. The years may pass, but it will keep carrying on."  
—Harold D. Alexander, Dean, Albany Law School  
From the 1939 LAS Annual Report

**Albany Law School students continue to learn at the Legal Aid Society in 2008.**

