

Remote Legal Support Guide

Project Profile: Volunteers of Legal Service



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Organizational Overview

For over 20 years, the Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS) Microenterprise Project has provided free legal education and direct representation to existing and aspiring low-income small business owners who cannot access professional services on the open market. Services are provided, in large part, by leveraging VOLS' pro bono network of attorneys at law firms and corporations. By partnering with these attorneys, VOLS provides small businesses with a broad range of information and transactional legal services on topics including business formation, contract drafting and review, commercial leasing, trademarking, and employment matters. Through this project, VOLS has helped thousands of New Yorkers to find an effective path out of poverty and into financial stability and independence. VOLS Microenterprise Project clients are low- to moderate-income. Over 75% are people of color, two-thirds are women, and many are immigrant business owners.

Project Process and Tools

For New York City's small businesses, the effects of the pandemic were immediate. Overnight, many New Yorkers were left without a source of income as public safety measures shuttered non-essential businesses. As the pandemic wore on, small business owners grappled with additional challenges such as bankruptcy, eviction, and navigating the patchwork of local, state, and federal government assistance programs. The Project quickly became overwhelmed with phone calls to its hotline, online inquiries, and referrals from community partners. Microenterprise Project attorneys balanced unprecedented workloads, with the pace of requests and referrals at times reaching 10 times pre-pandemic rates.

With so many seeking legal advice, the Project worked quickly to set up the Small Business Legal Relief Alliance (SBLRA), a partnership with over 20 New York City law firms, companies and nonprofits, to provide rapid response pro bono brief advice. The Project screened clients for their legal needs and referred their matters to the Alliance when appropriate. From 2020 to 2021, the Project helped place over 200 matters with the SBLRA.

As the Project receives referrals and inquiries, staff attorneys determine whether the matter is suitable for full representation through a pre-established pro bono placement process, or for brief advice services through the SBLRA. The matter is then sent through a listserv to the SBLRA network. Law firm and corporate members can volunteer by responding to the listserv. If a matter is not picked up within 48 hours, an SBLRA administrator assigns it to a member organization. The client receives services within two weeks. This partnership has allowed the Project to support more small business owners more effectively by expanding the capacity of pro bono attorneys and allowing them to provide timely legal advice.

Working with Pro Bonos

The VOLS Microenterprise Project continues to help clients and support volunteers as they face new and evolving pandemic and legal challenges. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the economy, and low-income small business owners have been among the hardest hit. The resulting job loss and income insecurity among families and employees of small businesses has had an unprecedented effect on NYC communities.

Although the SBLRA today sees a different kind of caseload, it continues to serve small business owners navigating crisis situations. Pro bono efforts have exponentially increased through the SBLRA and these resources need to be carefully matched with increased and shifting needs. This is resource-intensive, but once established, these partnerships can be stewarded and sustained by VOLS staff and by the individual partners.

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