

# Combating Domestic Violence with Legal Services

## 2022–23 NC State Bar Report to the General Assembly Regarding the Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act

**Each year, funding from North Carolina's Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act provides legal aid to help domestic violence victims and their children escape abuse and rebuild their lives.**

- 1 in 5 women report having experienced severe physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner during her lifetime.
- It is estimated nationally that the cost of intimate partner violence exceeds \$8.3 billion annually.
- Victims of intimate partner violence lose a total of 8 million days of paid work each year.
- In homes where domestic violence occurs, the rate of child abuse is 15 times higher than the average home, with co-occurring child abuse in 45–60% of homes where domestic violence is present.
- Children exposed to domestic violence are at an increased risk for behavioral and psychological problems, alcohol and substance use, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminal behavior.
- North Carolina service providers reported serving more than 75,000 clients during 2021–22 with domestic violence services including information, referrals, counseling, shelter services, court assistance, and more. Hotlines answered 94,125 calls and 7,673 chats.



**NC  
REPORTED  
115  
DV-RELATED  
HOMICIDES  
IN 2022**



**This is a decrease from  
2021 when reported  
domestic violence-related  
homicides totaled 148.**

## What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence occurs when one person in an intimate relationship uses a pattern of coercion and control against the other person during the relationship and/or after the relationship has terminated. It often includes physical, sexual, emotional, or economic abuse.

Domestic violence occurs in all kinds of families and relationships. Persons of any class, culture, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, age, and sex can be victims or perpetrators of domestic violence.

## State Funding in 2022–2023 for the Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act

A TOTAL OF  
**\$854,380**  
WAS DISTRIBUTED

### Funding through the Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act is used:

- 1 To provide legal assistance to domestic violence victims;
- 2 To provide education to domestic violence victims regarding their rights and duties under the law; and
- 3 To involve the private bar in the representation of domestic violence victims

### through cases that address:

- 1 Actions for protective orders;
- 2 Child custody and visitation issues; and
- 3 Legal services which ensure the safety of the client and the client's children.

**\$46,107**  
to Pisgah Legal  
Services to serve  
Buncombe,  
Henderson, Madison,  
Polk, Rutherford, and  
Transylvania counties

**\$808,273**  
to Legal Aid of  
North Carolina to serve  
all other counties  
(figures rounded)

### Amy's story

Amy is a resilient woman who has faced a lifetime of challenges due to muscular dystrophy. Her two teenage daughters and a supportive neighbor play crucial roles in assisting her with daily activities, given her disability.

Amy also spent two decades in an abusive marriage, enduring physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband. She bravely endured threats, violence, and intimidation, stressors which further exacerbated her medical condition.

After an incident where her husband held a gun to her head, Amy knew she had to get help. Amy called her local shelter, and they told her to call Legal Aid of North Carolina. When Amy came to Legal Aid, advocates assisted her in navigating the legal system to secure a domestic violence protection order. This order gave Amy possession of her home, prohibited her husband from contacting her, and granted her custody and child support.

Even with the court order in place, Amy and her daughters still dealt with fear, taking precautions like wedging objects against the door at night to safeguard against potential threats. Over time, however, their sense of security improved, and they can now finally breathe freely in their own home.

The life-changing impact of the legal intervention is clear for Amy and her family. Amy's daughters are thriving without their abusive father present, excelling in school and experiencing a newfound sense of stability. With support from Legal Aid of North Carolina, Amy has regained the independence and freedom that had been stolen from her.

Amy's story is a testament to the power of legal services to break the chains of abuse and empower individuals to rebuild their lives.



## LANC & Pisgah Legal Services receive funds from the Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act

# 7,020

CASES COMPLETED

**Legal Aid of North Carolina (LANC) and Pisgah Legal Services provide free legal services to domestic violence victims so they can escape abuse and rebuild their lives.**

### Legal Services

Legal aid attorneys and private volunteer attorneys help victims secure court protective orders to improve the safety of adult and child victims. Legal aid also helps victims address a range of other issues to increase their independence from abusers, including child custody and child support, divorce, division of marital property, and housing and consumer issues.

The type of services that are provided vary depending upon the availability of legal aid staff and private volunteer attorneys to represent domestic violence victims in each of the 100 counties in North Carolina. On short notice, legal aid attorneys must interview the victim and any other witnesses, gather records, and prepare for trial, which is scheduled within 10 days of when the victim files court action to obtain a temporary protective order. Because victim safety is always a concern, attorneys must address safety plans for victims and their families.

### Community Involvement

The legal aid organizations work closely with community-based programs, agencies, and task forces to address other non-legal needs of domestic violence victims. In addition, staff attorneys work to educate the victims and others within a community, such as landlords, about their rights and duties under the law. This community involvement is critical to helping victims gain much needed self-sufficiency to stop the domestic violence.

### Volunteer Attorneys

Legal aid attorneys train private volunteer attorneys to represent domestic violence victims in court to obtain protective orders. Also, volunteer attorneys accept cases where domestic violence victims need legal representation in matters such as divorce and child custody and support.

**From July 2022  
thru June 2023,**  
Legal Aid of North Carolina  
and Pisgah Legal Services  
completed **7,020**  
cases for domestic  
violence victims.

Of these cases,  
**847** were completed  
by volunteer attorneys.

Civil legal aid helped  
domestic violence victims  
secure **2,814** protective  
orders, protected custody  
rights for **636** victims,  
secured essential property  
and income for **77**  
victims, and enforced  
housing rights  
for **112** victims.



## About the

### Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act

In 2004, the NC General Assembly passed comprehensive legislation to address the problem of domestic violence. This multi-faceted program included access to legal representation for domestic violence victims under the NC Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act.

## Studies show legal aid stops domestic violence.



Research confirms that legal aid can reduce the potential for future domestic violence and also improve the lives of individuals who have experienced violence.

A study by economists at Colgate and the University of Arkansas<sup>1</sup> indicates that the availability of legal services decreases the likelihood that women will continue to be abused in the future. The study notes that while shelters, hotlines, and counseling are vitally important crisis-intervention aids, it is legal services that offer women alternatives to staying in an abusive relationship, providing the physical safety and financial security necessary to leave their abusers.

More recent research conducted in Iowa demonstrates the positive impacts of legal services on the lives of individuals who have experienced domestic violence. Researchers found that economic self-sufficiency increased after receiving legal services, with individuals reporting increased average monthly income and increased ability to live on current income.<sup>2</sup> The same research team found that the psychological well-being of those who received legal services improved over time, including significant decreases in symptoms of depression and PTSD.<sup>3</sup>

Legal aid is a valuable investment that decreases domestic violence and helps victims achieve self-sufficiency.

1 Amy Farmer & Jill Tiefenthaler, Explaining the Recent Decline in Domestic Violence, 21 Contemp Econ Pol'y 158 (April 2003).

2 Carolyn Copps Hartley & Lynette M. Renner, Economic Self-Sufficiency among Women Who Experienced Intimate Partner Violence and Received Civil Legal Services, 33 Journal of Family Violence 435 (July 2018).

3 Lynette M. Renner & Carolyn Copps Hartley, Psychological Well-Being Among Women Who Experienced Intimate Partner Violence and Received Civil Legal Services, 36 Journal of Interpersonal Violence 3688 (May 2018).

## Civil legal aid programs for low-income domestic violence victims in North Carolina



### Domestic and Sexual Violence Prevention Program (DSVPP)

The Domestic and Sexual Violence Prevention Program (DSVPP) of Pisgah Legal Services (PLS) provides free civil legal services for low-income victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, and child maltreatment. PLS works in collaboration with domestic violence prevention agencies, shelters, law enforcement and other partners in Western North Carolina, including family justice centers and resource centers to provide coordinated services under one roof for survivors.



### Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (DVSA) Project

The Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (DVSA) Project of Legal Aid of North Carolina provides free legal assistance to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault throughout the state.

Attorneys and advocates with the DVSA Project help survivors secure domestic violence protective orders against their abusers and provide a wide range of other legal services related to child custody, housing, employment, and more. This life-changing support helps survivors escape their abusers and start new lives.