

## **Remarks for Chief Judge's Statewide 2018 Civil Legal Services Hearing**

Good afternoon Chief Judge DiFiore and all the other distinguished members of this panel. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and allowing me to tell you about my experience with civil legal services, how these services benefited me, and how they changed my life.

My name is Tasha Moore and I live in Buffalo, New York. I am here today with my legal aid attorney Penny Selmonsky from Neighborhood Legal Services in Buffalo. Neighborhood Legal Services is a full service law office that provides free legal services in Western New York. NLS receives vital funding to do its work from the Office of Court Administration.

I'm a recovering addict with a co-occurrence of mental health. I have 11 years clean time, and during this 11 years I have been struggling to become a productive member of society. I was greeted by so many barriers and challenges that I almost gave up.

I was addicted to crack cocaine for 15 years and for the last five years of that time I was what you would call a chronically homeless person. I lived in abandoned buildings, I did not watch TV or listen to music and I did not communicate well with others at that time in my life. I had been through so many traumatic experiences at that time that I honestly believed that my mental capacity was dwindling away. I thought my life was over.

I was in and out of the Holding Center and Erie County Correctional Center more than 25 times and correctional officers said I would never be a productive member of society.

In 2007 I completed my last and longest jail bid of 1 year and 9 months. I was free - and I wasn't trying to go back to the streets. I applied for public assistance with the Department of Social Services, it took me 5 tries to complete job club and get some assistance.

I was on public assistance until I was able to have full-time employment. When I tried to get off assistance I had problems. The Department of Social Services did not budget my wages correctly and I had an overpayment of Medicaid benefits.

That's when I went to Neighborhood Legal Services. During this time I was faced with so many challenges that I wanted to give up. I could not understand why DSS didn't want to help me and see me succeed. Instead I was treated like I stole from them and they even sent the Sheriff's Department after me to garnish my wages.

Penny helped me with that situation. She was able to stop the garnishment so that I could pay back the overpayment voluntarily. Now I pay \$45 each month. If DSS would have been able to garnish my wages I would have had to pay fees and interest at 9%. This could mean that I might never pay back the original overpayment because my payments would go to interest only and would never actually reduce the original debt. If that had happened, I would not be here today.

Neighborhood Legal Services does a lot for the community and the underserved. If Neighborhood Legal Services hadn't been operating I do not know what would have become of me. Definitely I would not be this individual you see here today.

In May 2015, I graduated from Erie Community College with a 1-year certificate in Human Services and an Associate's in Social Science. When I started my associate's degree, I was really trying to prove a point to myself. I wanted to see if I was capable of gaining

education. The whole time I was working full-time and going to evening classes. This was a rough beginning for me- a different environment and adjusting to the expected behaviors from college students.

This was the beginning of an eye opening for me. I caught a clue of how the world really operates and how covert oppression may have played a role in why I was so lost in the first place. It made me want to learn more and broaden my horizon. This eye opener along with a few of my colleagues encouraged me get a bachelor's degree. In May 2018 I graduated from Buffalo State with a bachelor's in social work.

Now I want to earn my Master's of Social Work to find out how the world really operates and why I felt so helpless in my youth. When it comes to social work and my education I am driven to succeed and expect the most from myself and will not settle for less.

I started the master's degree program at UB on August 27, and even with that my Neighborhood Legal Services' family had to come to my rescue.

During my senior year at Buffalo State, I ran out of financial aid. I had to get a loan to pay for school. In order for me to attend UB, I would have to take out loans. Penny set up a Go Fund Me page and hopefully that will take the stress of one semester off me.

With the help of NLS I was able to recognize barriers and challenges and their help allowed me to jump over them and keep going. I have maintained employment with the same employer for 9 years. I am a Community Health Worker who does case management for Chronically Homeless Women. We cater to a diverse cliental with all types of social problems from housing, transportation, cultural diversity, navigation of Department of Social Services, and case management.

As a Community Health Worker for Hope Services I have advocated for individuals on all levels. I drove and did outreach for Code Blue. I provided outreach services to sex workers for the ladies on Broadway. I gave the ladies a safe place to come shower get something to eat, make phone calls, change their clothes and get linked to services. Sometimes I would drive them home to their children or take the young girls home to their parents.

I have learned that most of my issues and the issues of others who live in poverty are the result of public policy. Therefore public policy is where I need to be to make change. I would eventually like to work my way into public policy and focus on the policies that are injustices for people living in poverty and covert institutionalism.

I have had the opportunity to address some areas of concern with Neighborhood Legal Services. I was a member of their Community Advisory Group (CAG). As a participant of the Neighborhood Legal Services' CAG, I was able to explain to legal aid lawyers what it is like to live on the street and try to get off of public assistance so that they could better advocate for their clients. The CAG was comprised of a group of 6 women who were either experiencing homelessness or poverty. The goal of the CAG was to teach women to advocate for themselves and for other members of their community. The CAG taught me how to become my own best advocate with any agency from DSS to the water company. Now I serve on the Neighborhood Legal Services Board where I continue to be the voice for the client.

As an individual who comes from the streets I know how important Neighborhood Legal Services is to the community. It is important for Buffalo and everywhere else in New York that legal services continue to get funding. I do not know where I would be if it weren't for Neighborhood Legal Services.

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I am now capable of having dreams and reaching them along with my goals. I don't want to begin to think about what would happen to my community and the underserved if there were no Neighborhood Legal Services to turn to for legal help.

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