

Vermont Legal Aid & Legal Services Vermont



FY2026 Budget Presentation

House Committee on Judiciary

February 21, 2025



**VERMONT
LEGAL
AID**

WORKING TOGETHER FOR JUSTICE



**LEGAL
SERVICES
VERMONT**

Who We Are

- Vermont Legal Aid (VLA) and Legal Services Vermont (LSV, formerly Law Line) work together to provide free civil legal services to people throughout Vermont who are low-income, elderly, have disabilities, or have problems with healthcare.



OUR AREAS OF LEGAL PRACTICE INCLUDE

- Consumer Rights
- Discrimination
- Health Care and Health Insurance
- Housing
- Public and Government Benefits
- Disability Rights and Benefits
- Family Law
- Mental Health
- Elder Rights
- Taxes
- Victims' Rights

Overview of VLA Projects

- **Consumer and Homeowner Rights Project (CHRP)** - Provides legal services to Vermont homeowners who are at risk of losing their homes due to financial hardship (e.g. foreclosure, notice of sale due to unpaid property tax). They also help homeowners with estate planning (e.g. enhanced life estate deed) and provide legal assistance to heirs who need help getting the deed to the home they inherited.
- **Disability Law Project (DLP)** - Helps people with civil legal problems related to their disability (i.e. abuse, neglect, exploitation; access to assistive technology and transportation; issues in connection with education; disability benefits, and discrimination), including giving legal advice, supporting self-advocacy, and representing clients and their families in courts, hearings and other settings.
- **Elder Law Project (ELP)** – Through the ELP and the Medicare Advocacy Project (MAP), we provide advice, advocacy and full representation to Vermonters aged 60 and up (i.e. elder abuse, financial exploitation and neglect, state and federal benefits, appeals to ensure Medicare pays for care).



- **Office of the Health Care Advocate (HCA)** - Helps Vermonters with problems and questions related to health care services and health insurance (i.e. getting onto insurance plans, take action on improperly denied medical treatment, sorting out billing issues). HCA empowers people by giving advice and education that helps them understand and resolve their health care issues and questions. HCA also advocates on behalf of Vermonters in healthcare policy matters before the Vermont Legislature.
- **Housing Discrimination Law Project (HDLP)** - Works to stop housing discrimination and protect Vermonters' right to choose where they live. HDLP represents individuals and organizations in court and before state agencies, housing authorities, municipal governments and the legislature. HDLP also conducts housing discrimination investigations to document the presence of housing discrimination in our communities and educates the public about housing discrimination practices and how they harm everyone.
- **Housing for Everyone Law Project (HELP)** – Provides outreach to all tenants brought to court for eviction, aiming to prevent unfair evictions by assuring due process. Where rent assistance programs were available, HELP assisted tenants with accessing rent assistance.



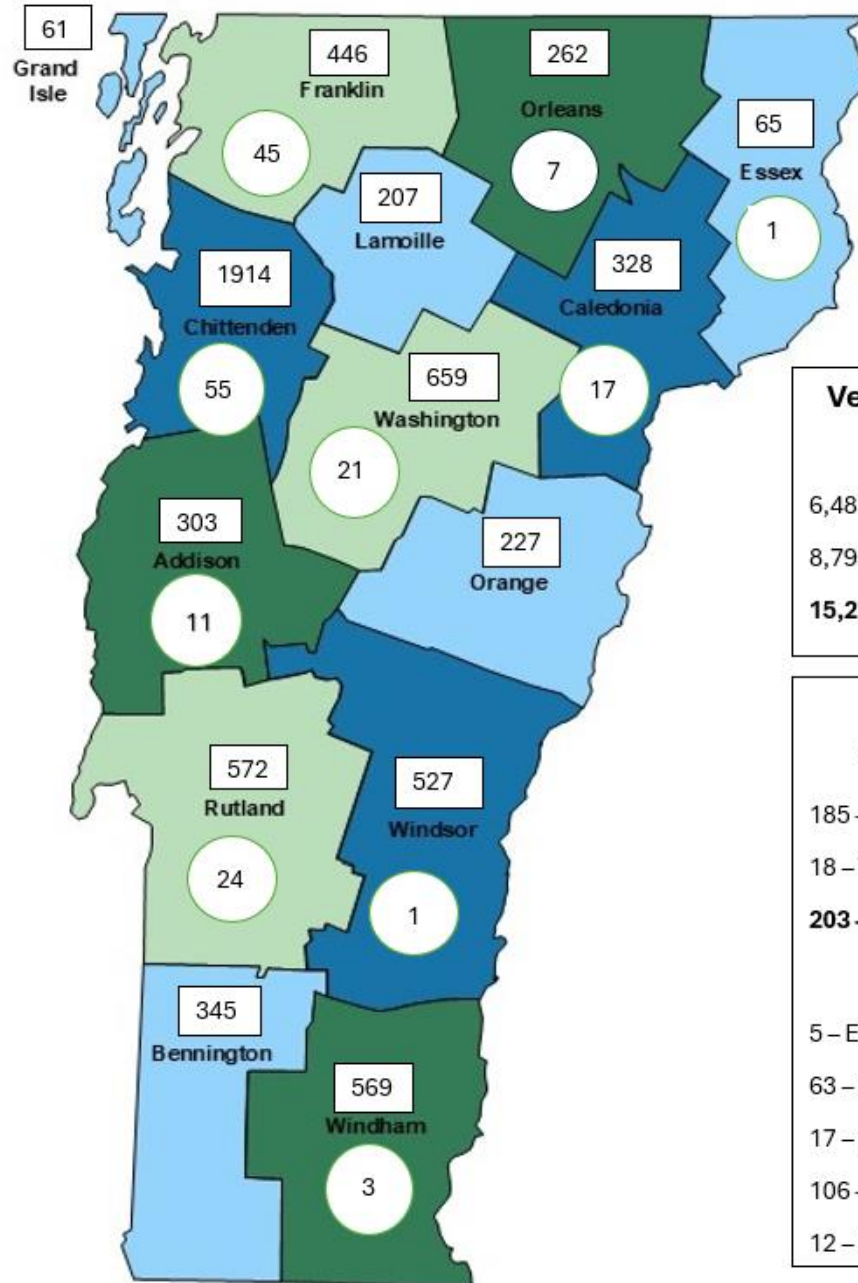
- **Vermont Long-Term Care Ombudsman Project** – Protects the health, welfare, and rights of people who live in licensed long-term care facilities. The project works to resolve concerns about long-term care and improve quality of life. VOP also advocates for changes to law and policy relating to long-term care.
- **Medical Legal Partnership (MLP)** – Through a partnership with UVM Medical Center, MLP works with care managers to address their patients' civil legal problems (i.e. housing, custody/visitation, public benefits, expungement). It also advocates for state policies to improve the lives of its clients.
- **Mental Health Law Project (MHLP)** - Appointed by the Superior Court to represent Vermonters in involuntary mental health treatment and/or medication cases, both in hospitals and in outpatient settings, to ensure that their rights and liberties are protected. It is also appointed to represent defendants in criminal cases in which the defendant has been determined by the court to be incompetent to stand trial or not guilty by reason of insanity. In addition, MHLP represents the rights and interests of people with mental health problems who are potentially subject to mental health statutes and regulations under consideration by the legislature, including the structure of the involuntary mental health system.



- **Poverty Law Project (PLP)** - Advances the law to eliminate the injustice of poverty. PLP represents low-income Vermonters with legal problems and advocates for system change (i.e. housing, public benefits, expungement, debilitating tax debt/disputes). At the statehouse, it advocates on behalf of low-income people to address the systemic and institutional causes of poverty.
- **Tenant Representation Pilot Project (TRP)** - Provides representation to income-eligible tenants in Windsor County and Lamoille County who have been served with an eviction complaint to ensure due process and protect a tenant's rights.
- **Victims' Rights Project (VRP)** - Helps survivors of crime (whether reported or unreported) with legal issues related to the crime they experienced (i.e. protective orders, family law advice, protecting victims' rights in criminal cases). VRP provides a range of services from legal advice and information to full representation in civil and criminal courts. It also works with other agencies to advocate for victims and amplify their voices.

In 2024, we served over 15,000 Vermonters and hosted 203 legal clinics across the state.

2024 Client Services




Vermonters Served in 2024
 □ = Cases/County
 6,485 - Total Cases by County
 8,793 - Total Unknown Vermont County
15,278 - Grand Total

Clinics in 2024
 ○ = Clinics/County
 185 - Total In-Person by County
 18 - Total Virtual
203 - Grand Total

Topics
 5 - Expungement
 63 - Family Law/Domestic Violence
 17 - General Legal Services
 106 - Housing
 12 - Elder Law



Current Budget

- Approximately one-third of our funding is from federal sources, both direct and indirect, that help us address fair housing, obtain services and protect the rights of people with disabilities, and low-income taxpayers. All of this funding is vulnerable to cuts under the current administration. We expect the first hit to be to our fair housing funding.
 - Funding for homeowner legal assistance ended December 2024 and the funding we received to help tenants is ending June 2025. We have had a hiring freeze for over a year and have been shifting these staff to other work, while trying to cover that work with other funding.
 - In the meantime, our core projects have been increasingly short-staffed and stretched thinner.
- 



VLA Sources of Revenue

- Right now, approximately 1/3 of our budget is from direct and indirect federal sources.
- We are seeking clarification from AHS about where in the governor's budget the various parts of our budget are located, but from what we can tell, the governor's FY2026 budget has level funding for VLA.
- Other nonprofit funding is approximately 7%.
- VBF funding (including the Vermont Poverty Law Fellow we are currently hosting) is approximately 7% of our budget.

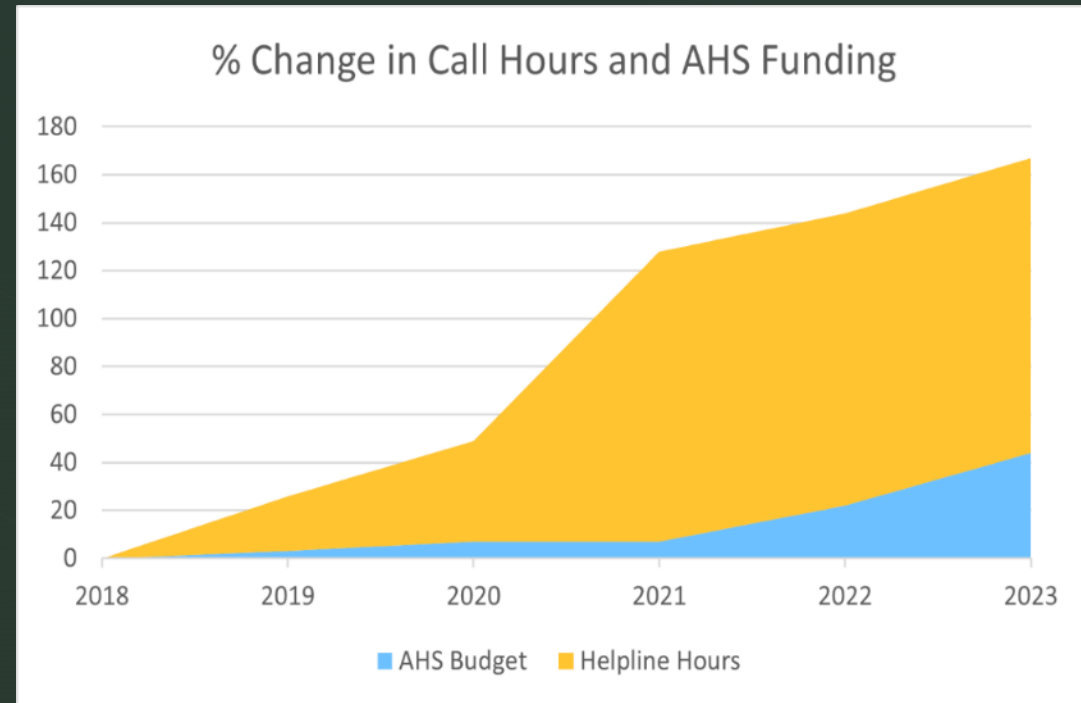


LSV Sources of Revenue

- A little under half of the LSV budget comes from the federal Legal Services Corporation, through a "Basic Field Grant" and specialized grants to support pro bono, technology, and other projects.
- About the same amount comes from funds channeled through Vermont Legal Aid, including joint VBF funds, sub-grants, and contract work to support the statewide helpline and web services. This contract work is largely supported through VLA's State funding.
- We receive limited funding from other outside foundations and donations.

Increase in Legal Needs

- Vermont residents are turning to VLA/LSV for help at an unprecedented rate. Over the past five years, **calls for legal assistance have surged by 20%**, with a 14% increase between 2022 and 2023 alone. Behind these numbers are real people—families facing eviction, low-income Vermonters navigating a growing homelessness crisis, and survivors of violence seeking justice and safety.



Reduced Funding and Its Impact on Access to Legal Services

- The Poverty Law Project, once a robust pillar of legal assistance for low-income Vermonters, was forced to significantly downsize in 2022 due to reduced funding. Vermont's poverty rate stands at nearly 10%, with homelessness skyrocketing by 300% since pre-COVID levels. **The need for legal help is at an all-time high**, but without additional resources, fewer Vermonters will get the support they desperately need.
- The demand for family law assistance is also soaring, particularly from survivors of crime and violence. **In 2018, 48% of our individual rights cases involved crime victims—by 2023, that number jumped to 67%**. We need the capacity to respond to this growing crisis.
- The eviction crisis paints an even more troubling picture. Requests for assistance for **evictions in Vermont have risen by 45% over the past five years**. Calls about eviction made up 28% of all housing inquiries in 2019, a number that has climbed to 43% by 2024.

- ▶ We respectfully request an increase of \$1.6 million to our base funding

Funding Request Breakdown


- **Maintain our housing work:** Funding for our Homeownership Legal Assistance Project ended in December of 2024. Our Housing for Everyone Law Project, representing tenants in evictions, will end in June. According to the Vermont Housing Needs Assessment, over 25,000 households are cost-burdened, paying more than 50% of their income toward housing. Without continued funding, many vulnerable Vermonters will lose access to critical legal support to help them keep a roof over their heads.
- **Staff Attorney for the Mental Health Legal Project (MHLP):** Due to increased demand for mental health legal services, we need funding for an additional staff attorney. Data shows that the complexity and volume of cases involving mental health legal issues are growing rapidly, making this position essential to maintaining effective service delivery.

Funding Request Breakdown

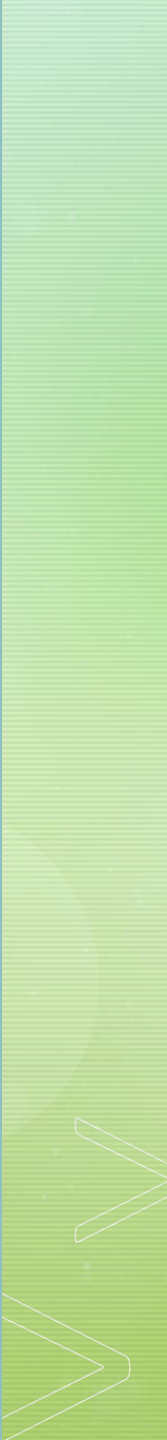
- **Staff Attorney for the Victims' Rights Project (VRP):** Family law is the second highest unmet legal need in the state. The Victims' Rights project provides direct representation and legal advocacy for victims of domestic and sexual violence, victims of crime, and clients seeking assistance with family legal needs. We frequently turn away Vermonters in need, due to a lack of staffing in this vital project.
- **Restore Staffing for the Poverty Law Project (PLP):** The PLP, which assists Vermont's most vulnerable populations, is currently operating with only 8.2 FTEs—down from 10.8 FTEs. This reduction was due in part to pandemic funding coming to an end. The PLP is primarily funded through the AHS budget, and without restoration to full staffing levels, we cannot meet the needs of those most affected by economic hardship and systemic inequities.
- **Eviction Protection Support for Legal Services Vermont (LSV):** Vermont is in the midst of an eviction crisis. Requests for assistance with evictions have risen by 45% over the past five years. In 2019, eviction-related calls comprised 28% of all housing inquiries; by 2024, that number had jumped to 43%. Housing now represents the highest area of legal need, accounting for 43% of all inquiries.

Without Additional Funding

- Further reduction in staff
- Further reduction in service
- Further exacerbation of the housing crisis and poverty in Vermont
- Increased cost to the state



Legal Services Vermont and Vermont Legal Aid's work is more critical than ever, but without sustained funding, we won't be able to continue meeting this overwhelming need. To protect Vermonters' rights, keep families housed, and help survivors achieve stability and safety, we need strong and immediate funding.



Impact of Our Work Through the Lens of Our Clients

- “My attorney was the best. I won my case because she was thorough and always on top of my case She knows the law very well. I'm so glad she was my attorney.”
- “My attorney was an absolute angel. I wouldn't have been able to win my case without her and the generous time she took out of her schedule to help me.”
- “My attorney was the best at keeping me informed and telling me what's going on, explaining the situation I want her to know she's very well appreciated and her job was excellent.”

Thank you for your continued support for Vermont Legal Aid & Legal Services Vermont.

If you have any questions or would like to request further information/testimony from VLA staff, please contact our Legislative Specialist, Andrea Smith, at atsmith@vtlegalaid.org.

