

Combating Domestic Violence With Legal Services

2024–25 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 survivors of domestic violence 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.
- In 2023–24, the most recent year for which data is available, providers in North Carolina reported serving more than 55,000 clients with domestic violence-related services including information, referrals, counseling, shelter services, court assistance and more. Hotlines answered 86,578 calls and 3,881 chats.

**NC
REPORTED
155
DV-RELATED
HOMICIDES
IN 2024.**



**This is a 13% increase
from 2023, when
135 domestic violence-related
homicides took place.**

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 2024–25 for the

Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act

A TOTAL OF
\$862,856
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.

\$44,770
to Pisgah Legal
Services to serve
Buncombe, Henderson,
Madison, Polk,
Rutherford, and
Transylvania counties

\$818,086
to Legal Aid of
North Carolina to
serve all other counties

(FIGURES ROUNDED)

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.

Pisgah Legal Services and LANC receive funds from the

Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act

9,170
CASES COMPLETED

Pisgah Legal Services and Legal Aid of North Carolina 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 survivors 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 survivors 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 survivors and others within a community, such as landlords, about their rights and duties under the law. This community involvement is critical to helping survivors gain much-needed self-sufficiency to stop the domestic violence.

Volunteer Attorneys

Legal aid attorneys train private volunteer attorneys to represent domestic violence survivors 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 2024 through June 2025, Pisgah Legal Services and Legal Aid of North Carolina completed **9,170** cases for domestic violence victims.

Of these cases, **518** were completed by volunteer attorneys.

Civil legal aid helped domestic violence victims secure **5,047** protective orders, protected custody rights for **452** victims, secured essential property and income for **167** victims, and enforced housing rights for **200** victims.



Pearl's Story

Content Warning: This story includes an account of domestic violence.

For more than six weeks, Pearl's husband kept her and their infant son captive while he abused drugs and beat her daily.

A "prepper," he had stockpiled food and weapons, and they had little to no contact with the outside world. Pearl's car keys and phone were taken from her, and she wasn't even allowed to take the baby outside for walks. Her husband was convinced that she was being unfaithful to him with people he imagined living in the woods around their house.

"He would tell me all the ways that he was going to kill me and how to get away with it," she remembered. "He liked to tell me all the details of how he was going to do it."

On their son's first birthday, he told Pearl that he had decided to blame her death on "the people in the woods." Laying the groundwork for his story, he forced her to call 911 and report that there were people outside their home. He didn't count on police being dispatched immediately.

"Then he started panicking because I was black and blue head to toe and had bite marks and cuts — so [the abuse] would be obvious to police," Pearl said.

He made her cover her bruises with clothing and make-up. Pearl watched him hide a pistol in his pocket as he walked outside to talk to the police.

The officers insisted they had to speak with the person who made the 911 call. He returned and told her what to say to them. Thinking this would be her chance to escape, Pearl grabbed the baby and walked outside.

She was hoping the police would notice she was wearing heavy clothing even though the weather was very hot. "I was terrified," she said. "He stood behind me the whole time with the gun in his pocket. I tried to act suspicious to clue them in."

Pearl spoke with the police briefly, then they left. She was devastated. Hours later, she began going into shock. "I was convinced I was going to die," she remembered. To her amazement, her abuser offered to call an ambulance.

When the paramedics examined her in the ambulance, "they said, 'It looks like somebody beat the hell out of you.' I told them I fell down the stairs because I knew he was on the other side of the door, listening."



Pisgah Legal Services attorney Becca Eden (left) helped Pearl secure a protective order, as well as obtain a divorce and full custody of her son. Her abuser is now in prison.

The first responders contacted the Sheriff's Office and Department of Social Services. Once Pearl learned her child was safely in DSS custody, she told the paramedics what had happened. She was taken to the hospital's trauma wing because her injuries were so severe. They included six fractures in her nose, damage to her neck from being strangled, traumatic liver injury and more than 200 marks and bruises.

Pearl soon learned that her abuser had been arrested. It wasn't long before she was reunited with her extended family and her child.

Pearl met with the Assistant District Attorney and an advocate from Helpmate, a provider of domestic violence services, to start criminal and civil proceedings against her abuser. She was referred to Pisgah Legal Services attorney Becca Eden, who is experienced in assisting domestic violence survivors.

Becca helped Pearl secure a protective order and get a divorce and full custody of their child. That support was critical, Pearl said.

"I would not have been able to get the same outcome in civil court if I had to do it all by myself," she said. "I wouldn't have known how to do it, and I don't think I would have been able to deal with the emotional aspect of having direct contact with him. And I wouldn't have been able to pay for an attorney."

Becca also stayed by Pearl's side during her abuser's criminal trial, where he was found guilty of four felonies, including first-degree kidnapping, and other charges that sent him to prison.

Today, Pearl is living with family and making a new life for herself. She volunteers with Helpmate, speaks out about domestic violence and serves on a local task force that trains police officers on how to spot and respond to domestic violence.

Story and photo courtesy of Pisgah Legal Services.

Gina's Story

Content Warning: This story includes an account of domestic violence.

When Safe Alliance, a provider of domestic violence services, first contacted Legal Aid of NC volunteer attorney Susan Yanagi about Gina's case, the complaint she received suggested that legal advice was likely all that was needed.

But as the details of Gina's harrowing assault at the hands of her husband emerged, Susan recalled, "I saw the case was more complex. I decided to represent her pro bono."

Gina shared that her husband had beaten her repeatedly, and in the last assault — which took place in front of their toddler — he had held a gun to her head and a knife to her throat. When Gina grabbed the child and fled, he chased them in his vehicle, attempting to run them over.

Gina reported the abuse to the police and decided to seek a protective order and legal custody of the couple's child. But it wasn't until she met with Susan, who gently earned her trust, that she shared a detail that would prove critical to her case: a crib camera in their toddler's bedroom had captured both the assault and the child's voice begging him to stop.

"Gina didn't realize how high on the lethality scale this assault was," Susan noted, referring to a tool used by first responders and others to gauge how potentially deadly an attack was. "I convinced her to allow me to show the video in court so that I could secure what she needed: a DVPO and sole custody of the child, with the father permitted supervised visitation at a neutral location."

At the hearing, Susan obtained the DVPO and a temporary custody order, but Gina's husband denied her version of events and filed for custody himself, insisting on a trial to settle the matter.

Susan, who works at Epperson Law Group, agreed to represent Gina in this case as well. But as weeks passed and the trial date approached, Susan couldn't reach her. Finally, on the day before the trial, Gina contacted her, saying that she was afraid of facing her abuser in court but still wanted Susan's help to fight for custody. She shared that she had a plan to move out of state to be closer to her family.

"A move would complicate the custody arrangement and required a shift in our approach to the case," Susan explained. "Judges typically don't allow custodial parents to move out of state unless they have a contract for a job or something similarly compelling."



At the custody trial, Gina did "extremely well" despite being very nervous, Susan said. "I was able to guide her through talking about the move, making sure she laid out the facts fully, so that the judge was likely to approve it."

Gina shared that her husband had beaten her repeatedly, and in the last assault — which took place in front of their toddler — he had held a gun to her head and a knife to her throat.

The video provided the evidence Gina needed to win the case. While her husband had been given the opportunity to view the video prior to trial, he chose not to, and the version of events he gave as testimony was proven by the video to be false.

"That didn't help his case," Susan remembered. "The judge said she'd never seen anything like this [assault] in her 17 years on the bench."

Gina was awarded sole physical and legal custody of their child and given permission to move. They're now safely living with family. "She's happy and doing well and thinking about going back to school," Susan said.

Reflecting on the case, Susan said building trust with this client was "crucial."

"Gina was very embarrassed to have found herself in this position. She had kept quiet about the abuse to keep up the façade that their life was perfect," Susan said. "I got personal with her, told her a little about my own story, and she realized I wasn't going to judge her. That's when she shared the video with me."

"It really shows that if you're willing to be vulnerable with clients in these situations, they'll be vulnerable with you."

Case shared by Legal Aid of North Carolina. To protect the client's identity, a pseudonym and stock photo have been used.

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 survivors 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 Arkansas¹ 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.² 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 post-traumatic stress disorder.³

Legal aid is a valuable investment that decreases domestic violence and helps survivors 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).

NC IOLTA has disbursed more than \$23M to combat domestic violence in North Carolina since 2004.

State funding under the Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Act is administered by NC IOLTA (North Carolina Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts) on behalf of the State Bar. Since the landmark legislation's passage in 2004, NC IOLTA has disbursed more than \$23 million in funding to combat domestic violence and provide survivors in all 100 counties with access to legal services.



Our deepest appreciation goes to the attorneys and advocates whose dedication and expertise help survivors of domestic abuse find the safety and justice they deserve.

