Established in 1969, RILS’ mission is to provide legal representation to the low-income and elderly whose access to the legal system is impeded. We strive to provide each of our clients with access to justice by representing each client individually, professionally and zealously. Our priority issues include housing, healthcare, education, employment, domestic safety and family stability.

Our strength is our talented and competent full-time staff of more than two dozen lawyers and legal assistants, up-to-date technology, and dedicated and experienced management oversight. We work with others, including the Rhode Island Bar Association’s Volunteer Lawyer Program, government agencies, social work organizations, community action groups and law-school affiliated poverty law providers and law student interns. RILS lawyers regularly share their specialized poverty law expertise with other lawyers by participating as instructors in continuing legal education programs.

In its early years RILS was financed primarily by the Legal Services Corporation and by the Rhode Island Bar Foundation through IOLTA funds. With the real estate recession and the decline in IOLTA funds, RILS depends increasingly upon other federal and state government support, private foundations and individual contributions.

Although today we are substantially the largest provider of legal services to Rhode Island’s indigent population, the increasing needs of those eligible for our services exceed our capacity. I am proud to serve as Chairman of this organization which has been and, with your support, will continue to be so essential to the fabric of our community.
A Message from the Executive Director

RILS is an integral part of the civil justice system providing high quality legal assistance and representation to more than five thousand low-income individuals and families each year. Our mission is both access to justice and antipoverty in nature.

While we represent clients in a wide variety of civil legal matters, our work is focused in seven priority areas including: 1) Safe Affordable Housing; 2) Income Maintenance and Food; 3) Affordable Health Care; 4) Family Safety; 5) Family Preservation; 6) Financial Stability; and 7) High Quality Appropriate Education.

An investment of an additional $3.67 Million in Rhode Island Legal Services, Inc., will improve access to the civil justice system, for low income families, veterans, and senior citizens. *Let’s begin with two projects that will increase access to justice for pro se litigants in family and housing matters.*

At a cost of $537,766 RILS can address the pro se problem in the Rhode Island Family Court. This would allow RILS to hire four attorneys and secretarial support. The Pro Se problem denies low income people without representation equal access to justice; places additional demands on court staff and services; negatively impacts opposing counsel’s time and efficiency by frequently requiring delays occasioned by interacting with and waiting for pro se litigants; and decreases court efficiency as a result of the logjam pro se litigants create in the courtroom.

Similarly, with an investment of $485,317, the RILS Housing Law Center will secure housing rights, defend tenants facing eviction, resolve related landlord-tenant matters, and prevent homelessness.

“Equal justice under law is not merely a caption on the facade of the Supreme Court building, it is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of the ends for which our entire legal system exists...it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status."

*U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, Jr.*
In 2013, Sarah moved in with her boyfriend John who received rental assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher Program administered by the Woonsocket Housing Authority (WHA). She and her three children had obtained permission from the WHA to move in and were added to the Voucher. Although Sarah and her boyfriend were not married; the five of them were a “family” as defined by federal law.

In the spring of 2015, John began drinking heavily. As he drank more, he became verbally, and ultimately physically, abusive. Once the relationship became physically abusive, Sarah obtained a restraining order. John vacated the apartment, and Sarah provided a copy of the restraining order to the WHA to explain his absence.

In violation of the provisions of the Violence Against Women Act, and the WHA’s written policies, the WHA authorized John, the perpetrator of the abuse, to keep the Voucher, and stopped making payments to the landlord on Sarah’s behalf. In danger of being evicted, Sarah contacted RILS for help; Staff Attorney Eric Bither was assigned to her case. Attempts to resolve the matter informally failed as the WHA insisted that Sarah was not entitled to the Voucher.

RILS attorneys drafted a Complaint to file in federal court, and notified the WHA’s attorney that RILS was prepared to file a lawsuit to protect Sarah’s right to housing. At that point, the Woonsocket Housing Authority issued a Voucher to Sarah and her children. After months of uncertainty, Sarah and her children were finally stable in their home.

“Survivors of domestic violence should not have to choose between losing their lives and losing their homes. Leaving an abusive relationship is terrifying enough without adding the fear of homelessness, and the Violence Against Women Act provides survivors with stability by preserving their entitlement to housing.”
Holistic Legal Assistance Network Goes National

Robert Barge and Nora Salomon participated in a panel presentation at the 2015 National Legal Aid and Defender Association Conference entitled, “Holistic Legal Assistance Networks to Reduce Poverty: Development, Implementation, and Efficacy.” Other panelists included Ken Smith of The Resource for Great Programs and Sandy Ambrozy of the Kresge Foundation. In total, over 35 people attended the presentation, including representatives of legal assistance programs, pro bono programs, law schools, the judiciary, and funding organizations.

The session included a presentation from each panelist, followed by a lively discussion of Rhode Island Legal Service’s Holistic Legal Assistance Network (HLAN) from the perspectives of legal aid advocates, legal assistance funders, and legal outcomes evaluators. Attendees were particularly interested in learning how and why the HLAN was started and how the outcomes of the program are tracked. The response to the panel was overwhelmingly positive, with many audience members relaying their own experiences with holistic programs, others pledging to create their own programs, and some providing insight as to additional tracking methods that might be used to attract additional funding.

The session also caught the attention of representatives of the Sargent Shriver National Center of Poverty Law, which subsequently asked HLAN advocates to submit an article for publication on its Clearinghouse Community Site.
Changes in Temporary Disability Insurance
Now Benefit Pregnant Women

For some time RILS noticed instances of differential treatment of pregnant women applying for Rhode Island’s Temporary Disability Insurance, (TDI), in violation of statute and federal protections. Unlike other individuals with temporary disabilities, pregnant women were frequently told that they had to apply for unemployment benefits instead of TDI if they were temporarily unable to do their work and the job offered no “light duty”. This meant that, unlike an individual with a bad back, for instance, pregnant women were being forced into leaving their work instead of receiving temporary disability and then returning, after the birth, to their jobs. In some instances both unemployment and TDI benefits were denied by the same Department, with different divisions of it claiming that the other benefit was appropriate. In fact, the DLT website documented this unequal treatment in its posted “Questions and Answers.” This result was directly contrary to statute. When Staff Attorney Veronika Kot pointed out this discrepancy to legal counsel at DLT, they agreed to quickly change the website and the policy. RILS continues to monitor instances where pregnant women are applying for benefits.
SAFE FAMILY PROJECT
Protecting victims of violence

Mary and her fiancé came to the United States in 2015 and quickly married. Immediately, Mary’s husband began to physically and sexually abuse her. Having no family, friends, legal status, English proficiency, or financial resources, she endured the abuse. Finally, after a particularly serious incident of abuse, Mary left and went to a domestic violence shelter. She was advised at the shelter of her right to file a restraining order; she did so and was referred to RILS for representation. RILS accepted her as a Safe Family Project client, as well as a Holistic Legal Assistance Network (HLAN) client. Before the first court date, Mary played a recording for Bridgette Louro, her RILS attorney, that she made of the last incident of abuse. In the recording, her husband can clearly be heard physically assaulting her. In court, her husband appeared with an attorney and served Mary with a divorce complaint. Attorney Louro agreed to also represent her in the divorce matter. Upon hearing the recording of the physical assault, the husband’s attorney agreed to the restraining order without the need of a contested hearing. Mary was relieved as she was terrified of testifying against her husband.

With RILS help, Mary obtained a divorce and a three year restraining order. She moved from the shelter to transitional housing and completed a CNA course. She is now searching for a job. Additionally, as a result of the partnership between HLAN and Dorcas International, Mary is applying for legal status in the United States.
FORECLOSURE PREVENTION PROJECT
Protecting Homes

Edith, a 95 year old elderly woman with mild to moderate dementia, stopped paying her mortgage. By the time her daughter got involved, she realized that all of her mom’s bills were out of control. Her daughter called RILS in a panic after she tried and failed to get a loan modification on her own. The mortgage company started the foreclosure process.

The RILS Foreclosure Prevention Project attorney filed a new modification packet with the mortgage company and stalled the foreclosure process while in review. RILS advised Edith’s daughter that Edith had filed a bankruptcy just a few years ago and was not eligible to file a Chapter 7 again for several years. Also, upon review of Edith’s Chapter 7 bankruptcy; RILS learned that there was a lien against the property for approximately $10,000 that was not avoided. After 7 long months the loan modification was approved for a three month trial plan.

RILS is reopening the bankruptcy and will be able to avoid the lien. Now, Edith will be able to remain in her home with only the mortgage. Edith’s daughter will eventually inherit the house free of all liens, except for the mortgage.

Edith’s daughter is relieved that her mother will be able to reside in her home for the rest of her life and not have to be forced out to a nursing facility due to a foreclosure.
EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY LEGAL CORPS
Removing Barriers to Employment

In August of 2014, with funding from AmeriCorps Equal Justice Works, RILS launched the Employment Opportunity Legal Corps. The Project’s advocates seek to remove barriers to employment and to empower clients to seek employment and help end poverty one person at a time.

The AmeriCorps Fellows and law students that comprise the Employment Opportunity Legal Corps provide legal assistance, including legal advice and counsel, brief service and direct legal representation to their clients. These efforts are focused on removing legal barriers to employment including but not limited to, the expungement of minor criminal records or sealing under state or federal law, and correction of errors in criminal records.

The Equal Opportunity Legal Corps, funded in part by Americorps, continued its work in 2015 removing barriers to employment for economically disadvantaged Rhode Islanders. Brian Furgal, La Tri-c-ea McClendon-Hunt and Jessica Deese staffed the project. They removed barriers to employment by expunging and sealing criminal records, restoring drivers and occupational licenses and repairing poor credit. In addition, two JD Students, Leslie Barber and Rebeca Tuches, assisted in conducting educational outreaches and on-site intake sessions throughout the state working with agencies that focus on job training and placement. From the inception of the program, more than 50 clients have obtained employment after the legal help they received from the EOLC. In one case, an unemployed veteran was denied entrance into a job training program due to his minor criminal record. An Employment Opportunity Legal Corp Fellow represented the client before the Rhode Island District Court and filed a motion to expunge his criminal record. The motion was successful and he no longer has a criminal record. He completed the training program and is now gainfully employed.
LOW INCOME TAXPAYER CLINIC
Promoting Financial Stability

The Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) is designed to meet the needs of low-income Rhode Islanders who are experiencing difficulties with the IRS. RILS is able to assist low-income Rhode Island taxpayers, including those for whom English is a Second Language, to obtain fair and equitable treatment in disputes with the Internal Revenue Service, and favorable resolution of their controversies with the IRS.

Two components comprise the LITC clinic. The outreach component is focused on education for those for whom English is a second language. The second component of the program is a controversy component focused on audits and representation of tax court and collection cases involving the Earned Income Tax Credit.

One example of the LITC’s work is the case of Mr. M., a senior citizen who sold his home and placed the profits of $30,000 into an annuity. The sale was reported on his 2011 income tax return. He and his wife had no other savings. In 2012 his wife became ill and he needed a lump sum to pay for her care. He took all of the money out of the annuity. The distribution was not taxable income. However the financial management company mischaracterized the withdrawal as taxable.

As a result Mr. Jones received a notice that he owed the IRS $3000 in additional taxes. He paid the bill with the money that was left after he paid for his wife’s medical care. Mr. Jones did not understand why he owed taxes to the IRS. He consulted with the LITC. The clinic director agreed that the distribution should not have been characterized as taxable income. She was able to get the financial company to issue a corrected 1099-R form to the IRS and assisted Mr. Jones in making a refund claim. The additional taxes were abated. He received all of the money he paid back plus interest.
THE MISSION

*Rhode Island Legal Services provides high quality legal assistance and representation to low-income individuals and eligible client groups for the purpose of improving their economic condition and overall wellbeing by protecting and enforcing legal rights, stabilizing the family unit and communities where clients live, promoting self-reliance, ending domestic violence, preventing homelessness, affording dignity to all people, and reaching out to groups with added burdens on their ability to access the civil justice system.*

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Veronika Kot, Esq., Staff Attorney
Rhea Logan, Social Worker
Juan Lopez, Legal Assistant
Bridgette Louro, Esq., Supervising Attorney
Latri-c-ea McClendon-Hunt, Esq., AmeriCorps Fellow
Linda Perrotta, Legal Assistant, Newport
Shanna Pitts, Esq., Staff Attorney
Cheryl Randall, File Clerk
Owen Rice, Esq., Staff Attorney
Nora Salomon, Esq., Supervising Attorney
Sonia Sanchez, Legal Secretary
Lia Stuhlsatz, Esq., Supervising Attorney
Charles Wilson, Technology Consultant
Michael Zabelin, Esq., Staff Attorney
5,913 Closed Cases in 2015

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Rhode Island Legal Services
2015 Annual Report

RILS BY THE NUMBERS: OUR CLIENTS 2015

Male/Female

Demographics

- 55% White, non Hispanic
- 21% Hispanic
- 12% African American
- 1% Asian/Southeast Asian
- 2% African
- 2% Other
- 1% Native American
- 1% Cape Verdean
- 4% Not specified

Client Ages

- Under 18
- 18-35
- 36-59
- 60 +
2015 FINANCIAL SUPPORT

$5000-$10,000
Adler Pollock & Sheehan P.C
Anonymous

$1000-$4,999
Victoria M. Almeida
John Barrylick
Laurie Rudd Bosman
Brown Rudnick LLP
Chase Ruttenberg & Freedman
Nancy and Donald Cloud
William J. Conley
Judith Crowell
Michael R. Goldenberg
Donna Hanlon
Howland Evangelista Kohlenberg
Burnett LLP
Peter Lacouture
Jennifer Suellentrop
Harry J. Weiss

$500-$999
Berndt W. Anderson
David and Susan Hibbitt
Mark Laffey
Herbert Ordonez
Rev. Ellen Quaadgras
Paul D. Ragosta
Stephen M. Rappoport
Barbara Roberts
Robert V. Rossi
John and Pat Tarantino

$100-$499
Lillian M. Almeida
Ken Anderson
William J. Balkun
Barton Gilman LLP
Robert B. Berkelhammer
William Braden
Robert Brooks
William F. Carroll, Jr.
The Hon. Edward and Audrey Clifton
The Hon. William Clifton and The Hon.
O. Roger Nie Thompson
Deborah DeBare
Angela DeFreitas
The Hon. Debra E. DiSegna
David Green
Andrew Horwitz and Alexandra Callam
Ronald and Arlene Gagnon
Eleanor Giannini

$100-$499 Continued
Noel Field, Jr.
The Hon. Robert G. Flanders
Stetson Eddy Malcom Farmer III
The Hon. Gilbert Indeglia
Richard V. Longo
Matthew A. Lopes
Michael D. Lynch
Robert Maggiacomo
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Talis Seja
John Skene
Richard and Betty Strabyle
Sheita Toby Swan
Jennifer Theroux
Cynthia J. Warren
Warren and Maria Weinstein
Partridge Snow & Hahn in Honor of
Richard Nadeau, Jr.

Under $100
Lois B. Agronick
Cecily V. Banks
Hugh E. Barry
Robert Biemer
Priscilla Blackman
Chester Bliss
Veronica Cintron
Russell Cummings
Deborah Gremour
Thomas and Kathleen Hohl
Richard Huhn
Theresa Manning-LiVolsi
Ernest G. Mayo
Bob and Margie Pelcovits
Lawrence Rothstein
Deborah Samson
Anthony B. Scarrett
Richard E. Simms
Charles and Helen Staunton
Samantha Sugerman
Richard B. Tucker III
John Zompa, Jr.

Corporation, Foundation, and
Government Support

Champlin Foundations
Equal Justice Works (AmeriCorps)
Internal Revenue Service
John Clarke Trust
Kresge Foundation
Legal Services Corporation
Ocean State Charities
Prince Foundation
Rhode Island Bar Foundation
Rhode Island Division of Elderly Affairs
Rhode Island Foundation
Rhode Island Judiciary
Rhode Island Justice Commission
Rhode Island Office of the
Attorney General
State of Rhode Island
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(800) 637-4529

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