



Empowering Our Community Through Access to Justice



COMMUNITY
LEGAL SERVICES IN
EAST PALO ALTO



A senior citizen and his wife, threatened with the loss of their home, fight off a series of eviction proceedings and work to claim their rights as tenants

A college student, liberated from worries about her uncertain legal status, pursues her dream of building a life in the United States

A homeowner, after being victimized by predatory loan-modification services, escapes the imminent threat of foreclosure and obtains a new, more affordable mortgage

A young corporate lawyer expands his range of professional experience by helping a woman to navigate the immigration bureaucracy

Empowerment. Community. Justice.

Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto (CLSEPA) exists to make the tools of the law available to everyone.

Our Mission

Too often, and for too many people, the legal system can be a strange and forbidding world—a maze of words and rules that is foreign to their everyday lives. Or, worse, it can be a tool used by those who would deny them their rights. People in and around East Palo Alto, in particular, confront an array of challenges that seriously hinder their ability to make the law work in their favor.

At CLSEPA, we take the machinery of the law and transform it into an engine of personal and community advancement. Through the casework that we do for individual clients and through our broader outreach work, we help people to improve their lives and to achieve their goals. In that way, we also build a sense of trust among the people we serve—trust in the law as an institution, trust in the legal profession, trust in their own ability to meet legal challenges.

In short, we aim to widen access to justice for all who live in the diverse community that we serve. By providing free and low-cost legal services, and by undertaking advocacy and education efforts, we seek to empower people—to make the law work for them, and not against them.

Our Organization

Founded in 2002, CLSEPA embarked on its second decade of service with a renewed commitment to our core mission. Today, we are a well-established organization that creatively uses its modest resources to achieve a not-so-modest impact.

To fund our operations, we rely on grants and donations from foundations, law firms, and private companies, as well as individuals. Our staff includes lawyers who specialize in areas such as housing, immigration, and consumer rights. Crucially, they are able to reach clients on a broad scale by working with an extensive and carefully managed network of pro bono attorneys.

As our name indicates, CLSEPA is an organization rooted in East Palo Alto, and in the region that surrounds it. (We serve residents throughout San Mateo and northern Santa Clara counties.) Many who live in this region face challenges—ranging from undocumented immigration status to a lack of employment opportunities—that impede access to justice. East Palo Alto is located just miles from the campus of Stanford University and from the office parks of Silicon Valley. Despite its proximity to those pockets of affluence and growth, however, our community continues to endure acute economic hardship.

We strive to address the real-world needs and aspirations of people in this community—to provide a

lifeline to those who require legal protection. By making top-rate legal services available to community members who have nowhere else to turn, CLSEPA allows them to gain a voice within our justice system.

True justice, we believe, cannot be bought or sold.

Our Work

CLSEPA serves multiple groups in multiple ways.

To clients, we offer advice and information, direct legal assistance, and referrals to private practice attorneys and to social service agencies.

To our community, we offer workshops and advocacy programs in areas of the law that truly matter to local residents.

To law firms, and to their partners and associates, we offer robust experiential and training opportunities.

To the public, and to the legal community as a whole, we offer policy expertise and thought leadership in key areas of legal practice.

To our donors, we offer an organizational model that efficiently leverages every dollar in our budget.

In the pages that follow, you will find stories of how CLSEPA gives people the power to achieve direct, meaningful change in their own lives—and broad-based change in the life of their community. Taken together, these stories tell the larger story of our organization.

Our Annual Impact

Hours of legal services provided	20,000 +
People who received legal assistance	1,500 +
Legal professionals who donated time	500 +
Hours of pro bono services provided	12,000 +
Market value of donated services	\$3 million +
Community members reached through legal education efforts	2,000 +



“If You Don’t Have a Lawyer, Forget It”

HOUSING

The aim of CLSEPA’s Housing Program is to give low-income residents the tools that they need to stay in their homes and to protect their rights as tenants. Housing scarcity and high living costs have led to a critical shortage of affordable rental units in our community. As a result, people often have no alternative to residing in substandard or even illegal housing. Our housing team supports and represents tenants, empowering them to handle problems that range from unsafe living conditions to a landlord’s refusal to return a security deposit.

The growing wealth of Silicon Valley casts a big shadow over the less-affluent communities that surround it. “If you live in this area, and you don’t have that ‘Silicon money,’ then you almost can’t make it,” says Sani Wadunia, who has lived in East Palo Alto since 1965.

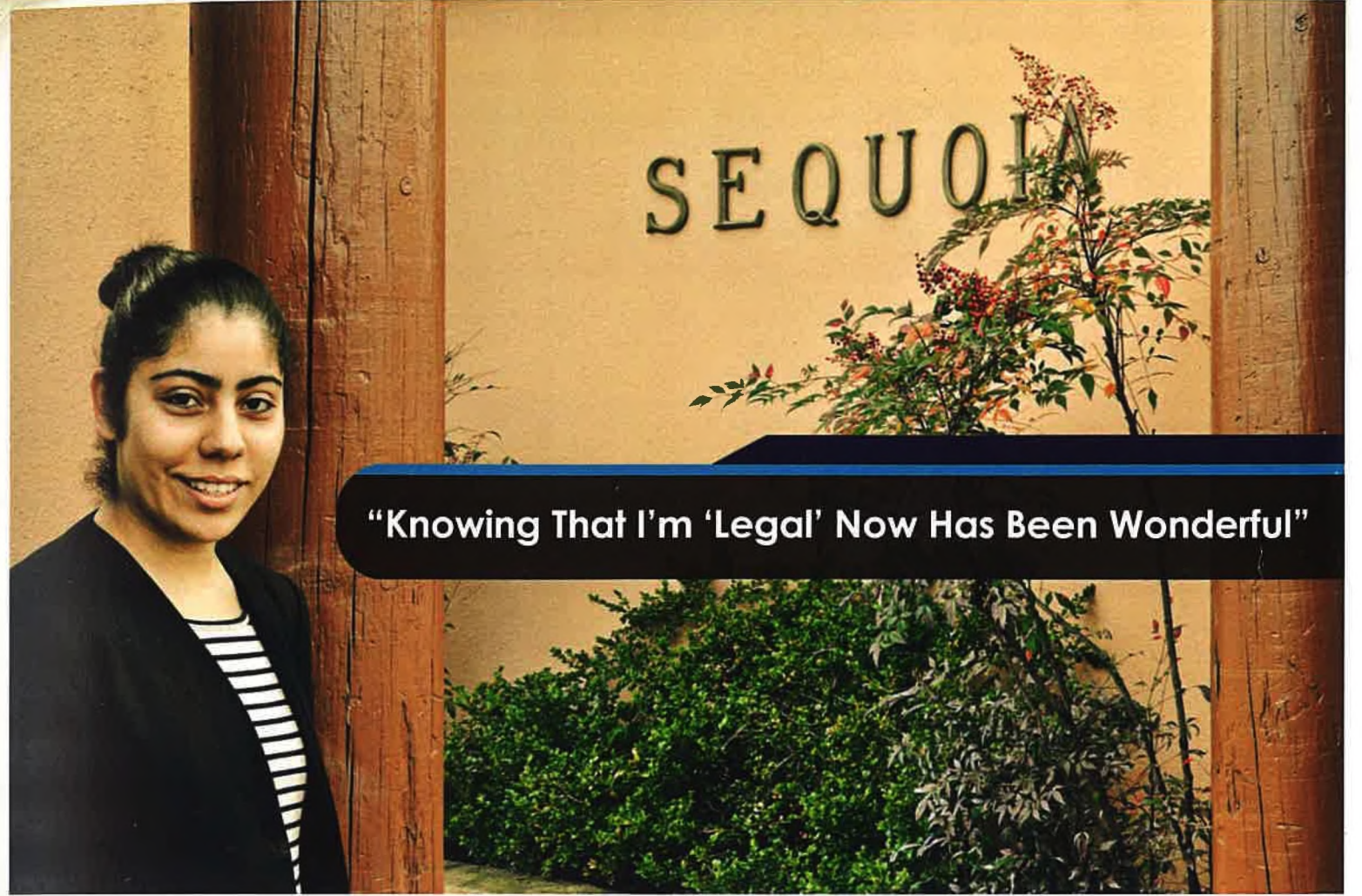
The challenge of securing decent, affordable housing has grown especially difficult. Consider the situation that Sani and his wife, Christel, face. He collects Social Security benefits and earns money by operating an ice-cream truck. She works as an in-home caregiver. Even with their combined income, they have struggled to find a suitable apartment to rent.

In 2010, the Wadunias thought that their struggle had ended when an East Palo Alto woman offered a rental unit to them. But after signing a lease, they learned that the unit failed to meet the city’s housing code. “I moved in and found out that it had no insulation,” Sani recalls. “There was no proper ceiling. It started getting real cold.”

Very quickly, the relationship between Sani and his landlady grew contentious. After he tried to install plastic sheeting to insulate the apartment, she called the police. Then she issued an eviction notice.

That’s when Sani came to CLSEPA, which assigned a lawyer to his case. Twice, the lawyer succeeded in obtaining a dismissal of the landlady’s eviction attempts. Later, another CLSEPA attorney helped the Wadunias to secure a court order that requires the landlady to pay them back rent (plus interest).

Eventually, the Wadunias left that carport unit, and today they have a stable—and fully legal—rental arrangement in East Palo Alto. Sani credits CLSEPA with empowering them to make that move: “The technical aspects of the law are overwhelming. If you don’t have a lawyer, forget it.”



“Knowing That I’m ‘Legal’ Now Has Been Wonderful”

IMMIGRATION LEGAL SERVICES

Magali Molina remembers the exact date when it happened: On May 21, 2012, the U.S. government approved her father’s application for a U visa. The U visa gives her father the right to live and work in the United States, and it sets him on a path toward permanent-resident status. “Now he feels safe,” Magali says. Similar rights apply to other members of the Molina family—including Magali, who became a derivative beneficiary of her father’s U visa. “It changed my life,” she says.

Previously, Magali was an undocumented immigrant. Her family came to California from Mexico when she was nine years old. She grew up in Redwood City and graduated from Sequoia High School, and today she’s a student at UC Santa Cruz.

Magali, in fact, is the one who initiated the U-visa process for her family. Under the U-visa program, immigrants who are the victim of a serious crime and who then help law-enforcement authorities to investigate that crime can apply for legal residency. That was the case with Magali’s father, who was the victim of an assault in 2008. A few years later, Magali brought his case to the attention of an immigration lawyer at CLSEPA.

“She was always willing to help, and she would remind us about the next step to take,” Magali says of the CLSEPA attorney who helped her family steer a course through the immigration bureaucracy. (Magali’s interaction with CLSEPA changed her life in one other way: It sparked an interest in the law that is academic as well as personal. During her sophomore year at UCSC, she decided to major in legal studies.)

U-visa status has empowered Magali, enabling her to get a Social Security number and making her eligible to obtain a driver’s license. “Knowing that I’m ‘legal’ now has been wonderful,” she says. “It’s opened up a lot of opportunities that I didn’t have before.”

Every year, CLSEPA assists hundreds of immigrants who live in and around East Palo Alto. Our work enables these immigrants to work legally, to pursue educational opportunities, and to keep their families together. One focus of our immigration practice is on supporting undocumented residents who have been victims of domestic violence and other crimes. Our immigration team also assists clients who face the prospect of removal from the country.



“I’m Still in My House”

ANTI-FORECLOSURE AND PREDATORY LENDING

CLSEPA's Anti-Foreclosure and Predatory Lending (APL) program protects people against financial arrangements that are burdensome or, in some cases, illegal. Our battle against bad lending practices happens on three fronts. First, we provide legal assistance to homeowners who face foreclosure and to tenants who are at risk of foreclosure-related eviction. Second, we work to educate people about their financial options. And third, we pursue legislative solutions that will help to minimize unsound lending activities.

Amid the ongoing housing market crisis, many homeowners have fallen prey to dubious loan modification schemes. Lupi Langi bitterly recalls her involvement with one group of scammers who claimed that they could help her: “They took money, but they never did their job.” Indeed, because of that encounter, Lupi came close to losing her home to a foreclosure action.

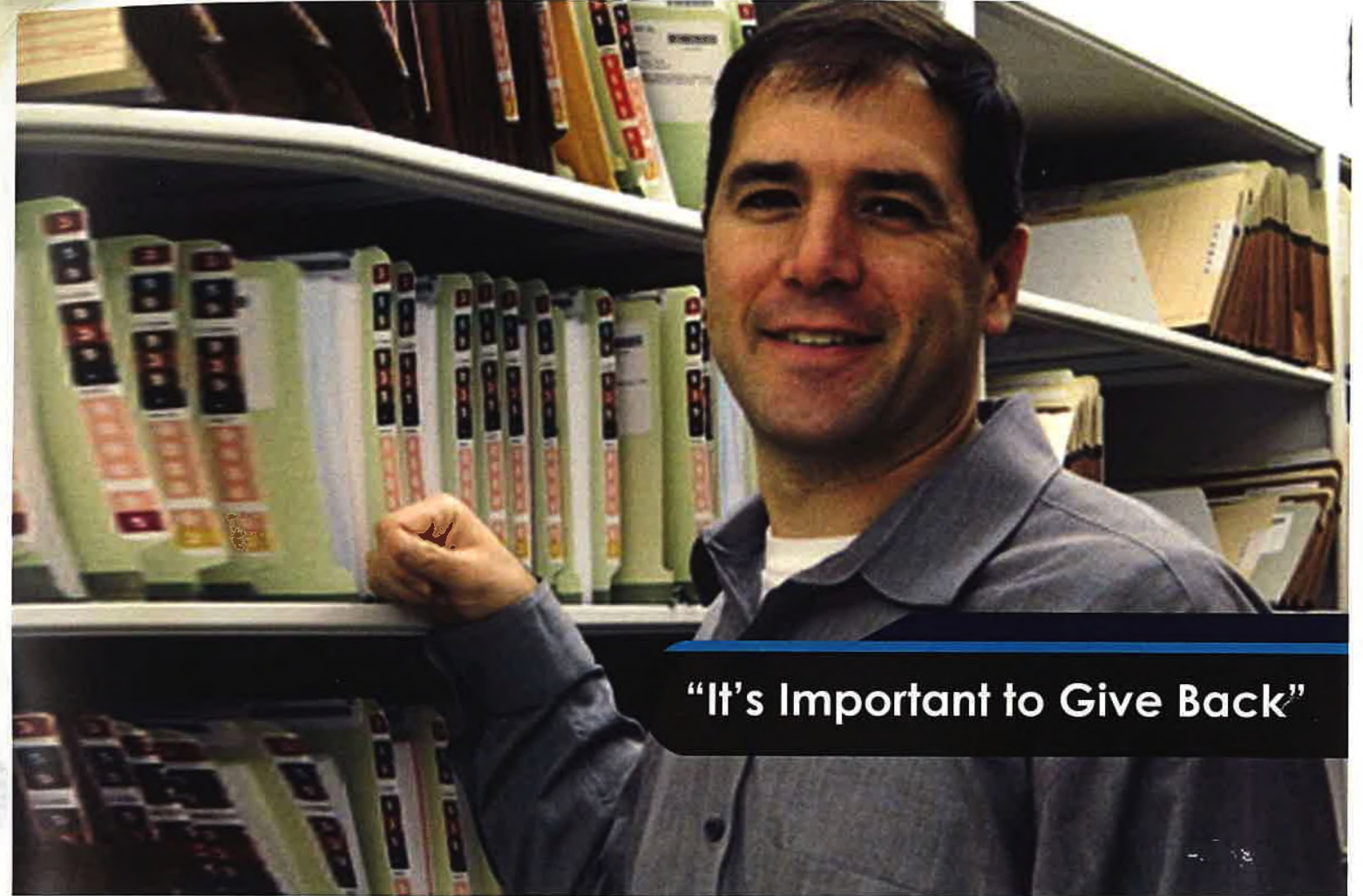
Lupi and her husband, Motekai, are both natives of Tonga, an island nation in the South Pacific. They came to the United States in 1982. She worked for many years as an in-home caregiver, and he earned a living as an aircraft-service worker. In 1989, they pooled their savings to buy a house in East Palo Alto.

In recent years, health problems have undermined their efforts to make regular mortgage payments. Motekai suffered kidney failure in 2004, and he has been disabled since then. Lupi, meanwhile, was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2010. Although an operation to remove the tumor was successful, she has been unable to work full-time.

Acute financial need drove Lupi into the hands of scam artists. Not only did they fail to help her and her family, but they made matters worse. “The guy told me not to pay my mortgage until the modification went through,” she recalls. “It mixed me up.” The Langis fell deeply behind on their loan, and their bank moved to foreclose on them.

Real help came just in time. In mid-2011, CLSEPA lawyers halted a scheduled trustee sale of the Langis’ home by speedily filing an application to modify their mortgage. Eventually, the Langis obtained a modification that included very favorable terms.

“I can’t do it by myself,” Lupi says, referring to the support that CLSEPA lawyers provided to her. “Because of them, I’m still in my house. Every day, I wake up and say, Thank God for their help.”



“It’s Important to Give Back”

VOLUNTARY ATTORNEY PROGRAM

“It’s very satisfying to help someone in such a direct way,” says Chuck Koch, an associate at Goodwin Procter LLP. He’s referring to pro bono legal assistance that he has provided to clients through CLSEPA’s Volunteer Attorney Program (VAP).

Chuck, an engineer by training, specializes in patent litigation. He helps companies such as Citrix, Hewlett-Packard, and NetApp to navigate through complex legal and technical terrain, and that work offers its own kind of satisfaction. Yet it seldom gives him a chance to engage face-to-face with clients who benefit personally from his professional expertise.

By contrast, Chuck says, his work for VAP clients “is definitely more real.”

Consider the case of “Mary,” an East Palo Alto woman who faced two major challenges. (Mary is not her real name.) She was an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, and she was the victim of domestic abuse. In 2010, her husband assaulted her. She reported the incident to the police, and a court issued a restraining order to protect her. But the fear of deportation, and of not being able to work legally, remained. Chuck helped Mary to apply for a U visa—a special legal status that would allow her to live and work in the United States.

Engaging with clients like Mary brings tangible benefits to a young attorney like Chuck. “You grow professionally,” he says. “You have the opportunity to run your own case.”

In mid-2012, Chuck learned that Mary’s U-visa application had succeeded, and he immediately shared the news with his client. It was like giving her “a Christmas present,” he recalls. “She was ecstatic.” Earning U-visa status empowers Mary to come out of the shadow that legal uncertainty had cast upon her.

About the work that he does on behalf of Mary and other CLSEPA clients, Chuck says: “It’s important to give back.”

Through VAP, CLSEPA helps people in our community to address problems that they could normally address only by hiring costly private legal counsel. VAP work also gives participating attorneys, many of whom are junior associates at local law firms, an opportunity to stretch themselves professionally. Thanks to the pro bono services that these firms and their attorneys provide, CLSEPA is able to maintain an extraordinarily large caseload despite having a very modest budget.



Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto

Your support empowers CLSEPA to empower people throughout the greater East Palo Alto community.

Join the many Bay Area individuals, law firms, and philanthropic foundations that have given their money, their time, and their passion to CLSEPA. The commitment that they have made to our organization enables us to continue our efforts to expand access to justice on multiple fronts.

Donate

Your contribution goes a long way.

Thanks to the financial support that we have received from a wide range of individual and institutional partners, CLSEPA has steadily grown in the breadth and depth of the services that we provide to our community.

Volunteer

Your time and your talent matter.

Our organization thrives because of our wonderful volunteers. We welcome highly motivated people—from attorneys to law students to paralegal professionals—who wish to give their time to support our mission.

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