

2022 ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

LEWISBURG PRISON PROJECT



“A SMALL BODY OF DETERMINED SPIRITS FIRED BY AN UNQUENCHABLE FAITH IN THEIR MISSION CAN ALTER THE COURSE OF HISTORY.”

- MAHATMA GANDHI

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

- Angela Trop

The LPP is approaching its 50th year. Can you believe it? As with previous significant birthdays, the board has reflected on what we have accomplished, where we are now, and what we may do in the future. I am grateful for and humbled by Isabelle Patten, Sally Farber, and Brigitte Cooke, the founders of the LPP. The founding women would be proud that we have affiliated with an organization that provides an opportunity for three full-time staff, including an onsite attorney. Additionally, the founders are our motivation to stay true to the grassroots nature of the organization. We (including all reading this) are a special set of people who show up, speak up, and expose injustice.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE (continued)

Prisoner civil rights amount to a drop of water compared to the overflow of liberties granted to a citizen who has not been convicted of a crime. Even so, the LPP has confronted a plethora of prison civil right violations over the past 50 years. Legal mail, personal mail, cell conditions, prison conditions, medical neglect, assault, sexual assault, parental rights, religious rights, LGBTQIA+ rights: these are just a few of the many issues in which we have engaged, both through advocacy and legal action. We want to highlight the details of what we have accomplished; for example, this September, we enlisted the help of a Bucknell senior history student, Kendall Robertson, to gather oral histories from previous and current members. Each year we will share a piece of our history in the annual newsletter. If you have a memory of the LPP, please share with us so we can stay connected to our history as it informs our future.

In May of 2022, the LPP had its first in person event since January of 2020. The outdoor Spring Fling was a great opportunity to reconnect with many of you. In April 2023, we will take time to celebrate the 50th anniversary and to collaborate with Bucknell University on a project that reviews and reveals how COVID affected the conditions of prisons and the health of the incarcerated. Members will receive notices of both of these events; the dates and times will be posted on social media as well. Our celebration will provide an opportunity to meet our new attorney, Evangeline Wright, as well as to become reacquainted with our paralegals, Sierra Shamer and Stina Stannik. I hope you can join us for both.

The next 50 years becomes our new agenda. We will continue to work toward our goal of enlisting community members to attend local prison board meetings, as discussed by Jennifer Thomson in her newsletter article. We also hope to raise money for a law intern to update our dated legal bulletins. Incarcerated individuals from around the country reach out to our office for these packets of information that explain relevant law topics in lay terms. Without legal expertise to use current case law, these bulletins will be obsolete, as explained by Ben Vollmayr-Lee. Please consider donating a resource of money or time to help us effectuate these two important goals. We are grateful to all that you have already done to sustain this organization and look forward to celebrating 50 years with you in the spring of 2023!

1973 - 50 YEARS - 2023

PRISON BOARD MEETINGS - Jennifer Thomson

In the fall of 2019, the LPP board began strategizing how to launch a new volunteer program: ensuring attendance at the monthly prison board meetings in Union and neighboring Northumberland, Centre, Columbia, Snyder, and Montour Counties. Our goals were to increase the local visibility of LPP, build grassroots citizens' networks, and to gather invaluable information for LPP's staff attorney and paralegals.

As we have learned, attending these monthly meetings is the best – and sometimes only! – way to learn what is happening “on the ground” at the county facilities. Connections that board members have made at meetings have also generated helpful contacts for LPP staff. For example, as a result of a conversation between Jennifer Thomson and Columbia County warden George Nye at the March 2022 meeting, LPP staff were invited to tour the Columbia County Prison and meet with its federal inmates.

Our progress on building a network of volunteers was quickly stymied by COVID, and during the subsequent years we've struggled to regain momentum. While individual board members have attended meetings in Union and Columbia Counties, and Angela Trop regularly attends the Northumberland County meeting, our goal remains to organize small groups of volunteers to rotate attendance at the meeting in their nearest county.

This summer an amazing volunteer joined our program. Jake Hilbolt has been attending the Snyder County meetings, and writing fantastically detailed and engaging summaries. His reports have given us a window onto conditions in that county which we wouldn't otherwise have been aware of.

For readers to volunteer, please give this program serious consideration! The information shared at these meetings is invaluable to LPP, and helps shine a light on conditions within a single county or patterns across multiple counties. This larger context allows staff to better identify brewing issues and gives greater dimension to letters received. With any additional questions, please be in contact with Jennifer Thomson: jct021@bucknell.edu.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

The LPP needs “watch dogs” to attend county prison board meetings. The job of the volunteer observer is to listen and note anything of interest using a crib sheet provided by the LPP.

County Prison Boards meet once per month. The meetings are approximately one hour or less. The LPP will provide you with the schedule. You and your team members can choose which dates each person will attend so that no one person is over-burdened.

Fill out our [Volunteer Interest Form](#) (scan here) or email Jennifer [@jct021@bucknell.edu](mailto:jct021@bucknell.edu)



WELCOME to staff attorney EVANGELINE WRIGHT



LPP and our associate organization, the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP), are delighted to welcome Evangeline Wright as our new staff attorney. Evangeline joins the staff after having worked in a range of legal contexts in central PA, most recently MidPenn Legal Services' Rural Tax Advocacy Project, where she provided representation to low income and nonnative English speakers in federal income tax controversies, litigated in U.S. Tax Court and Internal Revenue Service administrative proceedings, created educational materials, and collaborated with community organizations in helping qualified residents of Central PA to access federal tax credits and relief from federal income tax debt. Prior to her work with the Rural Tax Advocacy Project, Evangeline worked in consumer, housing, and family law.

A Midwesterner who received a B.A. in Anthropology and a M.A. in Sociology, Evangeline's experience working in a women's shelter drew her to legal work. Though she initially imagined focusing on family law, her main goal is to advocate for the most vulnerable members of society, those often caught in systems that disrupt and dehumanize relationships. Working at PILP and LPP will allow Evangeline to extend her commitment to incarcerated people who need access to health care—physical as well as mental health care. Inmates' conditions of confinement often exacerbate their health issues, and attending to problematic conditions of confinement and health care needs, Evangeline hopes to improve the lives of inmates in Central Pennsylvania, including those who are often overlooked in local jails.

Though she is new to PILP and LPP, Evangeline has lived in Central Pennsylvania for fifteen years. A hiker, she loves exploring the beautiful Rothrock Forest near her home, as well as the many other woods and mountains of Central Pennsylvania. She is excited to be working alongside our other staff members Sierra Shamer and Stina Stannik. Evangeline's hybrid work arrangement, an affordance of the pandemic, will also suit her as a mom of a teenager and twin 12 year olds.

We are pleased to have Evangeline working on behalf of incarcerated people in the middle district of Pennsylvania and welcome her to the LPP.

LPP LEGAL BULLETINS - Ben Vollmayr-Lee

The LPP is a primarily a local organization, providing free legal advice, assistance, and representation to the incarcerated of the middle district of Pennsylvania. However, the legal bulletins provided by LPP have a much broader, national reach.

Eighteen different bulletins cover a variety of topics, such as how to litigate a civil case, how to get started on legal research, and how to apply for injunctive relief. Other bulletins provide information about medical rights, psychiatric and disability rights, and much more. Inmates, or their families, can request paper copies of these bulletins or may download them from the LPP web site.

These resources are widely used: in a typical year we fulfill around 400 requests for paper copies. We do not have data for the number of documents downloaded from the web site, but the download page is visited around 600 times per year.



The bulletins are typically five to eight pages long, and written in straightforward language, intended to be understandable to the general reader and not presuming legal training. The order form and the website also include ACLU Fact Sheets on topics such as visitation rights, mail, health care, and assault and excessive force.



Unfortunately, most of the legal bulletins have not been updated since 2005. While the information in the bulletins is generally still accurate, more recent court decisions can affect the interpretation of previous, precedent-setting cases. As such, the LPP has made a goal of updating the bulletins, which will require paying for the appropriate legal expertise. The bulk of the revisions could be conducted by a law student, but their work would need to be checked by an attorney. Your contribution could help make this a possibility.

Thank you to our volunteers & interns!

Continued thanks to our volunteer Heather Haynos for assisting in the office since last year, and to our other volunteers, including our fall semester student interns:



Endia Scales is a Junior at Bucknell University. She is an Education major and Legal Studies and Social Justice minor.



Jacob Shaffer is a Senior at Susquehanna University. He is a Political Science major and Legal Studies minor.

LPP by the NUMBERS - Sierra Shamer

January - October, 2022

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LPP Bulletin
Orders Filled

Join our "number" today as a volunteer →



2130

Letters Received

2136

Letters Answered

LPP FLASHBACK

- Erica Delsandro

Have you ever heard of the Mariel Boatlift?

In April of 1980, Fidel Castro announced that all Cubans who wanted to emigrate to the U.S. could leave via Mariel Harbor. Approximately 125,000 Cubans boarded boats and arrived in Florida. Initially, the national rhetoric was positive; Americans were saving people from a communist dictator. However, an anti-immigration sentiment was growing in America. To make matters worse, the United States was not prepared to handle the significant number of Cubans who arrived in Florida. The Cuban immigrants to the U.S. were diverse: some wanted to reunite with family members who had already immigrated; some wanted to escape Cuba's failing economy for the American dream; some were tired of being persecuted because of former incarceration, their LGBTQIA+ identity, or their mental health diagnosis.

Immigrants who had errors in their paperwork, who were thought to have been formerly incarcerated, or who arrived with a mental health diagnosis, were taken into custody by U.S. officials. Several sources state that at least 14,000 Mariel Cuban immigrants who had not committed a crime in the U.S. were kept in federal penitentiaries. The Cubans from the Mariel Boatlift were not called prisoners because they had not committed a crime; they were technically detainees. More problems arose when the courts debated what, if any, constitutional rights the detainees had and

whether the Mariel Cubans were to be granted deportation hearings or exclusion hearings. Several lawsuits were filed and provide insight into the continued legal confusion surrounding immigration procedures and processes today.

In the news, these immigrants were often referred to as Marielitos, a term that "caught on" nationally. However, the term Marielitos is considered a derogatory term.

Though unaware of how many of the Mariel Cubans called the Lewisburg Penitentiary home, members of the LPP were clearly aware that the majority of them—if not all of them—should not be detained there. Many of the detainees were entitled to a hearing but, interestingly, no lawyer was required for these hearings. Because no lawyers were required, the integrity of the process was at stake, especially given the language barrier many of the Cuban detainees faced. With the help of many great Lewisburg citizens, the LPP organized volunteers to represent the Mariel Cubans in these hearings. This story from the LPP archives exemplifies one of our guiding principles: advocacy enacted through an ethics of care.

Do you know anyone who participated in these hearings? The LPP would love to hear from you!

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Lewisburg Prison Project Mission

The Lewisburg Prison Project, Inc. is a non-profit organization that provides advocacy, information, and legal assistance to people incarcerated in Pennsylvania regarding their conditions of confinement. We also provide incarcerated people across the United States with information and legal bulletins regarding conditions of confinement.

We are dedicated to the principle that incarcerated people have incontestable human and constitutional rights.



THANK
YOU!