

The Putnam County Legal Aid Society, Inc.
(PCLAS)

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I. Description of Agency

The Putnam County Legal Aid Society, Inc. (PCLAS), incorporated in 1966, is contracted by the County to provide legal representation to financially eligible clients in criminal and Family Court matters throughout Putnam. A non-profit organization governed by a Board of Directors (President Bonnie Feinzig, Esq.; Secretary Stamatia Dewbury, Esq.; and Directors Margaret A. Nicholson, Esq.; Thomas Purcell, Esq.; and J. Peter Collins, Esq.), the PCLAS employs seven attorneys as well as five full-time administrative staffpersons in order to fulfill its mandate, as more fully set forth below.

II. Services Provided

Pursuant to County Law Article 18-B, Putnam County is required to ensure representation to those legally entitled to counsel but who lack the financial means to obtain that counsel. As the primary agency charged with meeting that responsibility, PCLAS staff conduct intakes and screen applicants for financial eligibility. PCLAS attorneys represent eligible defendants in criminal court from initial appearance through ultimate resolution and also represent qualifying parties in Family Court upon the filing of petitions for family offenses, child custody/visitation matters, child support violation allegations, and abuse or neglect allegations filed by the County Department of Social Services.

In addition, because those persons charged with crimes are entitled to counsel at arraignment, the first formal proceeding against them, PCLAS attorneys appear in all Putnam County criminal court forums for purposes of ensuring the right to counsel at the time of initial arraignment. Such appearances may be required during regular work hours, but also frequently occur on evenings, weekends, and holidays.

While the above constitutes the lion's share of cases handled by PCLAS, its attorneys and staff also regularly assist clients in post-conviction matters such as violations of parole, probation or conditional discharge, applications for early discharge from probation, sex offender registration assessment hearings, etc.

PCLAS attorneys also maintain a steady, ongoing, and vital presence in Putnam County's "problem-solving courts": The Integrated Domestic Violence (IDV) Court; Judicial Diversion/Treatment Court; and the Veterans' Court.

Finally, it is crucial to note that the high-quality representation provided by PCLAS includes the engagement of social workers, interpreters, forensic experts, and other professional services essential to the fulfillment of its obligations to its clients.

III. Mission Statement¹

IV. Population Served

As noted above, PCLAS clients must qualify financially for legal representation. Persons are presumptively eligible for assignment of counsel if, among other things, (i) their net income is at or below 250% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines; (ii) they are incarcerated, detained, or confined to a mental health facility; or (iii) they receive, or have recently received, need-based public assistance.

Upon financial qualification and depending upon the level and nature of the charge, clients are represented by PCLAS attorneys at the County level in Criminal Court, Family Court, and the above-referenced IDV, Judicial Diversion/Treatment, and Veterans' "problem-solving courts". PCLAS attorneys also provide representation in the Justice Courts of the towns of Carmel, Southeast, Kent, Patterson, Philipstown, and Putnam Valley as well as those in the villages of Cold Spring, Brewster, and Nelsonville.

V. Significant Events & Accomplishments in 2025

- Total cases opened: 1,688 in 2025; 1,635 in 2024
- Number of evening/weekend/holiday arraignments: 304 in 2025; 322 in 2024
- Number of criminal court cases: 1,183 in 2025; 1,155 in 2024
- Number of family court matters: 505 in 2025; 480 in 2024

¹ The PCLAS Mission Statement is under review and awaiting Board approval.

VI. Staffing

In January of 2025, MaryPatricia Long, Esq., who spent 40 years as a criminal defense attorney with the Westchester Legal Aid Society, joined our staff as the full-time Supervising Criminal Court Attorney. MaryPat contributes a vast amount of knowledge, talent, and an outside-of-Putnam perspective that has proven extremely valuable.

Peter J. Reynolds, Esq., who had been a member of the PCLAS Board of Trustees for decades while employed by the Tock Law Firm, also joined our staff as a full-time criminal defense attorney last January. Unfortunately, both PCLAS and the local legal community suffered an unimaginably devastating blow when Pete died suddenly in late October 2025. PCLAS has yet to fill his position. We are so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with him on a daily basis for the all-too-brief time we did.

On a happier note, Grace Sestito, who had been working for PCLAS on an hourly basis (managing our voluminous discovery, etc.) earned her paralegal certificate in the fall of 2025. Grace now holds a salaried position as our staff paralegal and continues to exhibit professionalism, keen intelligence, and initiative.

VII. Sources of Revenue

Through an agreement between the County and PCLAS, the County provides necessary funding for the PCLAS to deliver mandated services pursuant to State law. In addition, since 2012, ILS has been providing supplemental funding to the County by way of quality enhancement (discretionary) distributions and statutory distributions.

Distributions are aimed to maintain the level of funding needed by the County to improve and ensure the level of quality legal representation to financially eligible persons through a variety of mechanisms:

- Quality enhancement (or discretionary) distributions have specific goals, including, but not limited to, providing counsel at every criminal defendant's first court appearance and supporting local initiatives aimed at improvements in upstate legal services providers' representation and programs.
- Statutory distributions are meant to ensure the funds are used to improve the quality of indigent legal services. Moreover, statutory distributions are formula-based and consider (i) net local expenditures and (ii) maintenance of effort, providing a relatively non-discretionary and unchanging level of support from year to year.

All grant award funding provided through ILS is intended to supplement, rather than supplant, County funding.

In 2025, Putnam County allocated \$652,200 in funding to PCLAS.

State funding through ILS for 2025 was as follows:

| <u>Award</u> | <u>Amount</u> |
|--|---------------|
| Distribution #14 | \$189,129 |
| Fourth Upstate Quality Improvement and Caseload Reduction Grant | \$100,000 |
| Fourth Counsel at First Appearance | \$207,204 |
| Second Upstate Family Defense (Child Welfare) Quality Improvement and Caseload Reduction | \$250,000 |
| Second Hurrell-Harring Statewide Expansion | \$877,467 |

Funding remains one of PCLAS's significant challenges. As noted above, barring unforeseen circumstances, PCLAS expects that ILS funding will remain roughly at current levels. Expenses, however, are guaranteed to rise. In addition to an ever-increasing caseload, PCLAS reasonably expects significant and ongoing increases in the costs of the personnel, services, equipment, and infrastructure that are absolutely essential to fulfilling its mandate to provide high-quality legal representation.

VIII. Goals for 2026

PCLAS's focus does not—and cannot—alter from year to year. Its overarching goal is to continue to provide vigorous, dedicated, high-quality legal representation to those persons financially eligible for its services.

Continuing to meet that goal requires hiring, training, and retaining a roster of stellar attorneys and staff by offering competitive salaries and benefits and providing the environment, equipment, and continuing education that support them in what is, by its nature, a uniquely challenging segment of an already challenging profession. To that end, PCLAS hopes to become—and remain—fully staffed throughout 2026 and beyond.