You bet. A $20,000 grant from the Long Island Community Foundation helped launch an initiative to improve the health of veterans by addressing legal needs that endanger their health or interfere with their treatment and recovery. Northport VA Medical Center, working with LegalHealth, a division of the New York Legal Assistance Group, (NYLAG), has become Long Island’s first facility to introduce a medical-legal partnership for veterans. The program will build on the Medical Center’s successful Veterans’ and Service Members’ Rights Clinic, which brings in Touro Law Center students to help patients with legal matters including social security disability, financial counseling, elder law, and immigration issues.

The LegalHealth division is the country’s largest medical-legal partnership, with clinics in 25 hospitals in New York City and Long Island. Medical-legal partnerships integrate the expertise of health care and legal professionals to make sure patients get the best care.

When legal issues are addressed, the results are impressive. Early data show that for every $100 spent providing legal help, veterans received more than $200 in increased income.

John Krulder, Sr., 72, an Army veteran of the 1st Infantry Division has advice for fellow vets: “If you need help, legal or medical or even for your family, seek it out and get it,” he says. “It’s nice to know that a program like this is offered and I’m grateful for the help.”

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Kimberly J. Warner, staff attorney for the Legal Assistance Group, recalls an emotional phone call a grateful client. “We’re excited about this great work,” Warner says.

Many veterans face obstacles back home. Those with mental or physical health problems are more likely to be homeless or unemployed. “Many of our heroes suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression, and find they have to do battle on the home front to get needed services,” says David Okorn, executive director of the Long Island Community Foundation. “This medical-legal partnership model at the Northport VA will serve many of Long Island veterans and help with their mental health issues.”

Vets with chronic health conditions, especially struggle financially, says Randye Retkin, Director of NYLAG’s LegalHealth division. “By working with Northport VA Medical professionals who understand the needs of their patients, in a setting that is familiar and convenient, we can provide legal services that will improve their lives, and the lives of their families,” Retkin says. “We’re immensely grateful to the Long Island Community Foundation. Their commitment makes it possible for us to heal veterans who have sacrificed so much.”

With over 131,000 veterans living on Long Island, mental health programs for our service men and women are one of the most important priority areas for the Long Island Community Foundation. We’ve given out more than $220,000 in grants in the past three years, thanks to generous Long Island donors.

Mental Health Association of Nassau County is using our $25,000 to train mental health professionals who provide clinical treatment to veterans. And Suffolk County United Veterans is giving short-term housing accommodations to veterans at risk of committing suicide with our $30,000. In addition, North Shore — LIJ Health System is using our $20,000 for a unified, public-private partnership with the Department of Veteran Affairs, aligning mental health support for veterans, as well as their family members.

Our senior program officer, managing Education, Environment, and Youth Violence Prevention, came to the Long Island Community Foundation in 2009. She also spearheads our Community Development programs, including the affordable and fair housing initiative on Long Island. She is a graduate of the University of Rochester, and studied at Columbia Business School’s Non-Profit Management. She’s been a member of the Energeia Partnership, a leadership academy that addresses issues challenges the region.

The Foundation gets so many proposals-how do you decide which to select?

This is the most difficult part of my job because of the many great nonprofits on Long Island. We identified eight issue areas of focus, and any proposal has to meet one of those. We look for a proposal that clearly connects the issue, the strategies that are being proposed, and the expected outcomes. We usually prefer nonprofits based on Long Island that have boots on the ground and a keen understanding of solutions. We determine where our grants can have the greatest impact. Then we make recommendations to our board. We try to remain flexible enough to respond to the unexpected, like Super Storm Sandy. We know we’re stewards of funds opened by charitable donors.

The Long Island Community Foundation funded a research report on Long Island’s affordable rental housing crisis. How does that help?

Advancing affordable and fair housing here is one of my favorite topics! No one can find a centralized database for basic information. We worked with the Regional Plan Association and the Rauch Foundation so everyone can plan effectively—something that didn’t happen on the Island before. Past practices created many problems we see today, like environmental issues, limited transit, and few housing options for young families or seniors. Without data and analyses, it is hard to make sound decisions for the long term sustainability in Nassau and Suffolk.

Long Island has some of the highest ranked schools in the country. Why is education a priority area for the Long Island Community Foundation?

The Island has high-performing and low-performing schools—sometimes just a few miles from each other. Long Island schools are the most segregated in the state and a recent study by the Long Island Association indicates a widening achievement gap between the wealthiest and poorest districts. Addressing education inequities is not only the right thing to do, it is the economically smart thing to do, for the future of Long Island. The Long Island Community Foundation does this by supporting in-school and afterschool academic programs and promoting partnerships and collaboration to bolster low-performing schools.

3 Questions | Sol Marie Alfonso Jones
Danielle Lazarra, 32 is a trained, self-advocate for people living with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She is one of 30 individuals who are being trained by Quality Services for the Autism Community (QSAC), through a $25,000 grant from the Long Island Unitarian Universalist Fund. This field of interest fund in the Long Island Community Foundation promotes progressive social change.

As the number of individuals diagnosed with autism rises, so does demand for programs. The New York State Front Door policy now requires participants to go through the NYS Office of People with Developmental Disabilities to find a provider. In addition, the State requires that individuals with ASD advocate effectively for their own needs.

“QSAC’s self-advocacy program teaches participants that everyone has voice and they have choices,” says Lazarra. “We are learning about our rights, the challenges we each face, and we’re working together as a group.”

Young men in foster care often have traumatic pasts, and many suffer from mental illness, substance abuse, and family discord. How to give them a peaceful, productive life?

A recent grant from the Long Island Community Foundation to Pal-O-Mine Equestrian, a therapeutic riding program in Islandia, helps teach them character and life skills. Called Creating Alternative Options for Young Men, the program includes a career readiness section that provides skills development — getting young men on track for high school graduation and jobs.

“Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is a collaboration between a mental health professional and a horse specialist, using horses for emotional growth and learning,” said Lisa Gatti, executive director of Pal-O-Mine.

“This non-traditional approach works so well because horses have the ability to read and react to humans’ non-verbal communication.”

The mental health professionals report that the psychosocial benefits are improvements in self-esteem, self-control, decision making, and interpersonal skills.

The curriculum targets three areas: self-advocacy training, interactions with elected officials, and participation in an Albany Advocacy Day.

“One of the activities of the program is a letter writing campaign to elected officials,” explains Lazarra. “It’s important for us to be able to communicate to the people that are making decisions for us and explain some of our challenges like, transportation, employment, and housing.”

“The philosophy of the Long Island Unitarian Universalist Fund is that those affected by a problem should have a role in combatting it,” said LIUUF Advisory Committee Chair Diane Cohen. “By giving people with ASD the skills to effectively advocate on their own behalf, QSAC’s program helps their clients raise their voices so that they can change policies and practices.”
Leadership news:

Patricia C. Marcin, partner at Farrell Fritz and LICF board of advisor since 2010, has been elected to serve as Vice Chair of the board.

Welcome new board members!

Salvatore Alesia, an attorney for more than 17 years, is an executive director and senior banker responsible for business development and portfolio management for J.P. Morgan’s Private Bank in Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk.

Robert S. Barnett, a lawyer and CPA, is a founding partner of Capell Barnett Matalon & Schoenfeld LLP, where he concentrates on taxation, trusts, estates, charitable planning, corporate and partnership law. He is the associate dean of the Nassau County Bar Association’s Academy of Law.

Janet M. Barone small business owner of a company that distributes precision machine tools and complex abrasives to aerospace firms nationwide. She has been a member of the Long Island Board of Directors of the Arthritis Foundation, and she’s currently president of North Shore Holiday House, a free summer camp in Huntington for girls from underserved families.

Claudia Pilato is vice president and director of marketing for Bridgehampton National Bank, which has grown to 29 branches and assets of $2.3 billion since she arrived in 2004. She is an executive board member of All For The East End, which raises money to support nonprofits on the North and South Fork.

Brian M. Travers is founder and CEO of Travers & Associates, Inc., a boutique firm that helps clients with life insurance strategies. He is founder and chairman of the Day One Foundation, which helps underserved children get an education.

Marc Wong, is a certified financial planner in Melville. He is on the board of directors of Omega, a chamber music ensemble in New York City.