When I see children and families at the new playground at Bell Park in East Palo Alto, I think about their journeys here. Some children can trace their path back to a home near the park where they grew up. For other children, the journey began over 1,000 miles away across the ocean or half a continent. Many families have suffered setbacks along the way – threatened with eviction or foreclosure, or forced to separate from their loved ones for years. But, no matter their journey, they have found a home here in East Palo Alto.

We are helping these families to stay here. Skyrocketing housing costs are threatening families working multiple jobs to survive. In response to this crisis, we brought on three housing attorneys and launched a negotiation clinic at the courthouse to help hundreds of tenants at risk of losing their homes.

We helped craft a landmark tenant protection law to address a comprehensive range of issues – displacement, harassment, and the right to organize. This September, we brought a class action lawsuit against the largest landlord in East Palo Alto for charging tenants with unlawful fees.

We are also helping children who are newcomers to our community. Many of these children fled violence and abuse in their native countries. We are excited to welcome our first Equal Justice Works Fellow who will be helping to keep immigrant children out of harm’s way.

Finally, we are launching programs to enable families to achieve secure and thriving futures. Our volunteers are offering legal advice to low-income entrepreneurs and small business owners to help them succeed.

We are also helping re-entering community members who have turned their lives around and need a fresh start.

There is still so much more to be done if we are to ensure that East Palo Alto remains a diverse and vibrant community for families gathered in places like Bell Park. Please reach out and share your ideas and enthusiasm. I look forward to hearing from you.

Phil Hwang
Executive Director
Intervention Helps Family Save Their Rent-Stabilized Housing

By Jason Tarricone, Directing Attorney—Housing and Anti-Predatory Lending

The housing crisis in the Bay Area continues, with rents rising faster than income for working class people. The Daily Journal recently noted that renters must make $29.83 per hour to afford a one-bedroom apartment in San Mateo County, which now rents for an average of $2,136 per month. The article also noted that San Mateo County’s homelessness rate rose by 12% from 2011 to 2013.

Everyday our team of housing attorneys fight for tenants who are trying to avoid becoming homeless as they face the consequences of this heated rental market.

Vanessa, a single mother of three who works as a dental assistant, lived in a rent-stabilized apartment in East Palo Alto for two years, but when she was late with the rent, Equity Residential, the largest landlord in East Palo Alto, began evicting her from her home.

Vanessa and her children lived in a homeless shelter before she found her apartment, and she feared that the eviction would force her to return to a shelter with her family. She knew she would not be able to afford a new apartment in this housing market. Vanessa began packing her boxes and took the disheartening step of putting her name on a wait list for a homeless shelter.

But then our housing attorneys intervened. Daniel Saver and Margaret McBride initiated discovery and investigated the case, and they soon reached a settlement that allowed Vanessa and her family to stay in her apartment.

San Mateo County is tied with San Francisco and Marin Counties as the top three most expensive counties in the United States.

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We fight especially hard for East Palo Alto tenants facing eviction because East Palo Alto’s rent stabilization ordinance keeps rent levels affordable.

Sadly, working class tenants in San Mateo County who are displaced from their homes by rising rents, medical emergencies or job loss are finding it increasingly difficult to find other affordable housing in the Bay Area. Their most affordable housing option is usually their current home, which is why our housing team works diligently to preserve tenancies like Vanessa’s.

Over the past year, we have helped hundreds of families avoid homelessness, repair dangerous conditions, and resolve other housing issues. With the support of our volunteers, we will help hundreds more families in the coming year.
Partnering with Google to Empower Immigrant Youth

By Joyce Song, Pro Bono Director

“Believe in yourself. The world may not be telling you that you are worthwhile, but you are.”

Those were the words of Juan Lang, a security engineer at Google, Inc., addressing an audience of young undocumented immigrants and their families who were collected in the Google dining hall, awaiting assistance from volunteers on their Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) applications. Earlier this year, we partnered with Google on a panel aimed to inspire and encourage these youths to embark on intellectual and professional pursuits beyond what they might have imagined.

Reports indicate that tech companies in Silicon Valley are not keeping up with the diversity of the nation. By 2040 forty-two percent of the population will be black or Hispanic. And yet, whether established or start-up Silicon Valley tech companies, blacks, Latinos and women are notoriously underrepresented.

One theory for the disparity is there are fewer people of color studying science, technology, engineering and math. But undocumented immigrants who have spent most of their lives in the U.S. face challenges accessing educational and professional support that are complicated by their immigration status. One young man bravely shared that it was not only his immigration status but also his autism that was preventing him from becoming who he wanted to be. Frank Rodriguez, a Google product manager, pointed out that being autistic could be a positive trait, and one that was especially suited to working in tech. “In college, I was told I couldn’t study what I wanted. I proved them wrong though and worked harder than anyone else to get to where I am now.”

“I guarantee you people will fail you and you may fall. But you have to set your mind, and keep moving forward.”

-Sarahi Salamanca, activist and web developer

Sarahi Salamanca, a recent recipient of the DACA Champion of Change award by the White House, was adamant that the young people in the room “dream big.”

As the panel discussion ended, and young people began meeting with Google’s volunteer attorneys and our staff, there was no doubt of the immense challenges facing young undocumented immigrants. DACA is important in anticipation of comprehensive immigration, and if it can help even a few young people achieve their dreams, then it is a step in the right direction.
Our Annual Gala and Fundraiser in June was a resounding success, thanks to our generous sponsors and contributors!

And a special thank you to everybody who attended to make the night so spectacular!

We hope to see you again next year!
Women and Children Fleeing Violence Face a Deportation Fast-Track

By Kaitlin Kalna Darwal, Senior Immigration Attorney

Early this summer, the announcement that thousands of children from Central America were swarming into the United States triggered varied responses and heated debate. Some took to the desert with guns, swearing to stop the invasion of children. Some prevented buses from entering their towns where travel-weary children were to be housed. Others sent clothes, books, and toys to the overcrowded facilities where children were being processed.

In July, the Administration announced a policy expediting the removal proceedings for recently-arrived unaccompanied children and families. This policy has drastically impacted children and families trying to navigate the complex immigration legal process. Most of the children and families have fled extreme violence and threats of harm or death to themselves or close family members if they remain in their homes. Given the dire consequences facing these children and families, obtaining legal counsel is paramount.

According to a recent report, several children who were deported from the U.S. were murdered in Honduras upon their forced return.

We have been working in close collaboration with other Bay Area organizations to spearhead a response to this crisis. In the San Francisco Immigration Court, there is an expedited docket of cases in the morning for unaccompanied children and in the afternoon there is an expedited docket for families with children.

One way we have responded is by volunteering to staff these dockets. Armed with crayons, construction paper, and stickers, our attorneys try to explain the law and provide some comfort to unaccompanied children younger than 10 years old, and to terrified mothers with toddlers. During the court proceedings, our attorneys sometimes have to hold babies so that their mothers can listen to important information being provided by the Immigration Judge.

The need for legal advice is overwhelming. Unaccompanied children and families do not have the resources to pay for private representation, and Bay Area non-profits do not have the resources to represent all of the unaccompanied children and families.

Undaunted, we are helping to lead the movement to ensure these children and families are able to exercise their right to seek protection under our laws.

Get Involved!
Learn more at www.clsepa.org and contact Joyce Song at jsong@clsepa.org or (650) 326-6440 x 303

Meet our new staff, VISTAs, and fellows!

Margaret McBride, Esq.
Housing Staff Attorney

Margaret earned her J.D. from UC Hastings with a concentration in Social Justice Lawyering. As a law student, Margaret worked with organizations dedicated to promoting housing rights. She also served as an extern to Judge Edward M. Chen of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California. Margaret also volunteered with Bay Area Legal Aid as a housing attorney.

Marina Reyes
Immigration Advocate

Marina joined our staff in June 2014. Previously, Marina volunteered at the Citizenship and Immigration Program at CET in San Jose, where she gained valuable knowledge on immigration law. Marina is very passionate about helping people and giving back to the community. She hopes to one day become an Immigration Attorney.
This summer, Skyline College asked us to find a transactional attorney who could present practical legal concepts to an assembly of students ages 17-60 with varying degrees of business knowledge and experience. We connected Skyline with Soyeun Choi who presented on business incorporation and contracts to the introductory business class.

Initially, the students were skeptical about sitting through the three-hour class. But, students could relate to Soyeun’s memorable and empowering presentation. Using visual metaphors like Voltron, Soyeun explained how people could insulate themselves from liability by forming corporations, like huge robots, around their businesses. Students became more familiar with concepts like S-Corporations, LLCs and partnerships and asked great questions, thinking critically about their own business ideas.

"If there's one thing I know about business owners, it's when they get information, they use it!"

-Soyeun Choi, volunteer attorney

The presentation was part of a newly developed program to provide low-income small business owners with access to legal advice from experienced transactional attorneys like Soyeun, who operates her own firm and is very familiar with running a business. She notes, “The United States is still a great place to take control of your own business ... Attorneys can help by volunteering for local organizations that provide access to legal advice and by educating the population as well.”

Bill Harrison, another volunteer, worked in business management and law at electronics manufacturing companies in Silicon Valley and Los Angeles. Bill uses his background as former in-house counsel to assist our clients with contract performance disputes, choices between business entities, compliance with regulations, and operational matters. Bill’s expertise is crucial in helping one client resolve a contract dispute.

Through informational presentations and individual consultations at regular clinics, we provide many small business owners in San Mateo County with access to legal information and full representation so they too can create healthy businesses that contribute to the growth of our community.

For example, we also partnered with DLA Piper LLP and the Association of Corporate Counsel to provide small business owners with a yearly legal audit at a clinic in September.

The business world watches Silicon Valley for new ideas, great start-ups, game-changing IPOs and moves by well-known international corporations in the tech industry. With the help of great partners like Skyline College, JobTrain, Renaissance Center, and the Legal Services for Entrepreneurs program at Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights, we have engaged nearby pro bono partners to help low-income entrepreneurs in and around East Palo Alto and San Mateo County.

Julianne Aiello
Americorp VISTA Fellow

Julianne joined our team in August 2014 as a Resource Coordinator to build our volunteer capacity. Julianne served her first year as an AmeriCorps member in Los Angeles where she worked as a Community Liaison for Saint Sebastian School. Julianne has completed internships at the Daniel Pearl Foundation and the Bay Area Women’s Sports Initiative, both of which propelled her to continue working in the non-profit sector.

Brenda Guzman
AmeriCorp VISTA Fellow

Brenda joined the immigration team in August 2014 to help us better serve vulnerable clients. Brenda received her B.A. in International Relations from Stanford University, where she worked at the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society. She also volunteered as a youth mentor at St. Francis of Assisi Youth Club, where she served and discovered her desire to work with the East Palo Alto community following graduation.
**STOPPING PAYDAY LENDING LOCALLY**

*By Keith Ogden, Anti-Predatory Lending Staff Attorney*

In July, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau announced a $10 million dollar settlement with ACE Cash Express, a payday lender. The CFPB found that ACE used illegal debt collection tactics to pressure borrowers into taking out additional loans they could not afford.

Payday loans lure financially strapped families with the promise of “easy cash.” But these loans don’t fix a family’s financial difficulties, they make them worse. They are high-cost with highly problematic short-term repayment periods. The business model is designed to keep borrowers on a debt treadmill, reaping profit for the industry and sinking families further into financial despair.

We partner with local organizations to reverse the harm done by payday loans.

Richard Woods is a 34-year-old with a 3-year-old toddler who first came to our partner Samaritan House in San Mateo for rental assistance. When Mr. Woods and his wife first fell behind on rent, he went to Check’n’Go in San Mateo for a payday loan. “What I didn’t know was the vicious debt cycle I was in and the drama it started with my family,” Mr. Woods says.

“It was very hard for me to ask for help and admit that what seemed like a good idea [had] turned my life for the worse.”

-Richard Woods, payday lending victim

In addition to the upfront payday interest fees, he incurred bank fees for non-sufficient funds. The results of his payday loans were verging on disastrous.

Thankfully, after a month of financial coaching and assistance at Samaritan House, Mr. Woods began to turn things around. He opened an account at the San Mateo Credit Union, paid current his rent, and began to act on a plan to rebuild his credit and begin saving. And he got out of payday lending debt.

CLSEPA has been at the forefront of advocacy and outreach efforts to significantly reduce payday lending leading to the passage of payday lending restrictions in East Palo Alto in 2011. The county of San Mateo followed with a similar ordinance for unincorporated county land in 2012.

On August 12, 2014, Menlo Park passed a ban on payday lenders, the result of more than two years of ours and our partners’ sustained advocacy. Menlo Park’s ordinance declares payday lenders and auto title lenders a nuisance, thus barring them from the city. Menlo Park will also be joining local outreach efforts by producing and distributing English and Spanish language brochures highlighting the dangers of, and alternatives to, payday loans.

Momentum continues to mount. Regional partners have successfully advocated for passage of restrictive ordinances in San Jose, Gilroy, Sunnyvale, Los Altos, Santa Clara County and, just this July, Daly City. Long Beach and Fresno have also recently enacted ordinances restricting payday lending.

On the national level, we are joining regional partners, pushing for (1) significantly longer repayment terms, (2) mandated disclosures regarding the dangers of payday loans, and (3) underwriting rules that ensure a borrower’s ability to repay without re-borrowing. Together, we are working from all angles to end payday lending.

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**Katharine Wies**  
*Legal Fellow*

We are excited to host Katharine as a legal fellow beginning in fall 2014. Katharine earned her B.A. from Yale University, her Masters degree from Princeton University, and her J.D. from Stanford Law School. Prior to interning with us during law school, Katharine worked as a Terrorism and Counterterrorism Associate with Human Rights Watch.

**Misha Seay**  
*Equal Justice Works Fellow*

Misha will join us in January 2015 to provide legal representation to immigrant youth in East Palo Alto and neighboring communities. After receiving her J.D. from Hastings in 2011, Misha worked as an Attorney Advisor for the Department of Justice’s Executive Office of Immigration Review in San Francisco. She also served as a fellow at UC Hastings Center for Gender and Refugee Studies.
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