



Good Afternoon, I am John Holt, the Director of the Senior Law Project at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). For over 40 years VOLS has partnered with community based organizations and the private bar to provide free civil legal services to New Yorkers who otherwise cannot afford or access representation. Our five core projects serve small business owners, individuals accessing benefits, immigrant young people, incarcerated mothers, and older adults in every borough.

The VOLS Senior Law Project's focus is providing low-income aging New Yorkers with access to free, high-impact legal services that allow them to plan for death and incapacity through the execution of life planning documents, including Last Wills and Testaments, Powers of Attorney, Living Wills, and Health Care Proxies. For our clients, these documents are vital tools to help ensure that their wishes and preferences around health care decision making, end of life care, personal finances and benefits, funeral planning, and the distribution of assets after death are followed. Without these services, many of our clients would find themselves unable to safely remain in their communities, forcing them to enter into costly institutional care environments or be subject to overly restrictive protective arrangements, like Article 81 Guardianship.

Everyday in our work we see the real barriers older adults face in receiving these important services, often missing the window of opportunity where advance planning can be a viable preventative tool. Lack of information and resources, social isolation, cognitive and physical decline, exploitation and abuse all contribute to aging New Yorkers being unable to effectively learn about our organization and access our programming. To combat this, the Senior Law Project partners with older adult centers and other community-based organizations all over the city to provide older adults, and the professionals who work them, education on the importance of advance planning and clear direction on how to timely reach our program.

The City Council and our city agencies have been at the forefront of creating an accessible and livable New York in which older adults can safely age in their communities, but there is still work to be done. In the present moment many New Yorkers are afraid to present for services due to the policies of the federal government, and we need to continue to seek ways of building trust and community in what is the fastest growing demographic of older adults in our city: immigrants. We also see that even when older adults do access our city's systems there is not always clear identification of their interconnected needs, and that the responses are often siloed and address the presenting symptoms and not the root causes of the problems. Think of an older adult who receives assistance in housing court in a non-payment action. That person may receive effective assistance of counsel and prevent an imminent loss of housing, but for that success to be sustained other supports need to be identified and



offered, whether that is long-term care planning, benefits assistance, or attainment of legal advance directives.

The Senior Law Project respectfully calls on the council to continue to support and prioritize programs that reach aging New Yorkers in their homes and communities to provide holistic services that are responsive to their diverse financial, medical, social, legal, cultural, and linguistic needs and to ensure that legal service organizations like VOLS have the resources they need to continue to provide assistance that promotes autonomous decision making and closes the justice gap for older adults.