



Because every survivor of intimate partner violence deserves a lawyer by their side.

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of two hands clasped together in a supportive grip. The hands are resting on a document that is part of a file folder on a wooden desk. In the lower-left foreground, the head of a wooden gavel is visible. The overall tone is somber and professional.

2025 Executive Summary

SLSLS provides free legal services to survivors seeking protection from Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).

I saw it firsthand. I presided over thousands of cases involving domestic abuse during my 22 years as a Judge in St. Louis County, many of those cases concerning Orders of Protection (OPs). An OP is a court order that legally requires an abuser to stop contacting the person seeking safety.

It was common for the survivors of the cases with the worst allegations to not appear for their hearings, forcing me to dismiss their cases. I knew why; many of their abusers likely threatened them, causing them to not go forward with getting an OP. Those who did show in court were typically unrepresented, while their abusers often hired attorneys. These survivors were understandably daunted by such an unfair battle. Some simply left the courthouse before their trials began.

It was clear to me that the system was failing survivors. St. Louis County judges are wise, compassionate, and fair but, just as mine were, their hands are tied. SLSLS was founded to address this problem. Its mission is quite simple: no survivor of IPV should ever walk into court alone. With an SLSLS attorney by their side, survivors are more than three times more likely to get the relief they deserve.

Securing an OP allows survivors to reclaim their lives. It enables stable parenting, improves employment performance, and opens the door to financial independence. Once free from constant fear, survivors often see gains in mental and physical health, re-engage in community and civic life, and pursue educational opportunities. Most importantly, this progress helps break the cycle of abuse, modeling strength and safety for the next generation.

Michael D. Burton

SLSLS Founder and Executive Director

Survivor Story

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My relationship didn't start out abusive — he was charming and seemed like a good person. Then one day it happened, and I blamed myself. I endured verbal, mental, physical, and financial abuse. The

name-calling cut my soul, and the physical abuse made me numb.

He stalked me at work, my home, and my friend's house. Once, he climbed through a window he had left unlocked and hid in my shower. When I came home, he jumped out, took my phone, punched a wall, and held me down — all while I was pregnant with his child. When my baby was just 9 days old, he punched, kicked, pushed, and choked me nearly to death. I got an Order of Protection (OP) that day.

The OP eventually ran out, and I didn't hear from him for five years — until he showed up in my front yard with a gun, screaming he was there for me. Watching it unfold on my home camera, I was terrified he would shoot me. I filed for another OP. My abuser showed up to court with a lawyer. I live paycheck to paycheck and couldn't afford my own. Then I saw a news story about SLSLS and reached out. They responded quickly and took my case.

My SLSLS lawyer listened without judgment and fought hard for me. He exposed my abuser for who he really was, despite the fake mask he put on in court. My lawyer secured a 10-year OP, and I cried — relief and trauma washing over me. When my abuser later tried to file an OP against me, SLSLS had my back again, and it was thrown out. The peace of mind SLSLS gave me was priceless. I can't believe something worth so much was totally free.

Leanne

Two Years of Impact

Issue	The Problems	The Solutions: SLSLS Impact in its First Two Years
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)	12 million people in the U.S. experience IPV each year. About 41% of women and 26% of men experience IPV during their lifetime.	Helped 411 people obtain, extend, and enforce their Orders of Protection (OPs) — and connected them with valuable resources.
Children Affected	3.2 million children in the U.S. witness IPV annually. Boys who witness IPV are 10x more likely to become abusers; girls are 6x more likely to become survivors.	Helped 221 children in violent homes reach safety.
Underreporting	Only 10% of IPV incidents are reported. And a very small fraction of those incidents are brought to the OP Office. The average survivor endures 50 acts of violence before reporting, stays for 2.5 years , and makes 7 attempts to leave — before leaving for good.	Coordinated with more than 30 community partners (law enforcement, hospitals, advocacy groups, places of worship, restaurants, hair salons) to proactively reach out to survivors through trusted channels before they suffered further abuse.
Legal Challenges	In St. Louis County, 80% of OP petitions are dismissed — often because abusers threaten, intimidate, or plead with survivors to not go forward with their cases or not show up for court at all.	99% of SLSLS clients appeared in court for their hearings. Clients secured protection at more than 3x the rate of other petitioners.
Financial Barriers	66% of all reporting survivors in St. Louis County live in North County (the most economically disadvantaged part of the region). Most survivors cannot afford to hire private lawyers. Of the very small number of cases where the survivors actually appear in court for their trials, 90% of them are unrepresented . Lack of representation creates a significant barrier to securing protection.	Represented survivors in 272 cases for free , providing legal services worth approximately \$742,800 .

Mission Milestones

SLSLS has expanded its impact through the development of **key collaborations**. Our partnership with MERS Goodwill, for example, reflects a multifaceted collaboration that has strengthened our ability to serve survivors. In addition to being a generous benefactor, MERS Goodwill has provided SLSLS with office space and equipment, and its Assistance with Career Counseling and Employment Services for Survivors (ACCESS) program is a key referral partner for SLSLS. Through ACCESS, survivors receive career services that complement the legal protection that SLSLS provides. This partnership strives to provide survivors with both immediate legal protection and financial independence, each of which are critical for them to rebuild their lives.

We also launched our **Pro Bono Partnership Program** in 2024, partnering with various law firms in the St. Louis community. These firms provide free legal representation, while SLSLS offers training and courtroom mentoring. Our “veteran-shadow” model pairs seasoned attorneys with newer ones, ensuring that survivors receive top-tier legal support while developing the next generation of advocates.

Future Goals

Looking ahead, our goal is to provide survivors in the St. Louis area with access to skilled legal representation and to the resources they need to rebuild their lives. **To achieve this, securing sustainable funding is essential.**

We aim to build capacity by **hiring staff attorneys** to increase the number of clients that we can represent, as well as expand the scope of our representation. Our clients desperately need support in their custody proceedings, which offer more permanent protection for them and their children. We also plan to **hire an Advancement Director** to strengthen fundraising efforts and reduce reliance on short-term grants.

While the office space that MERS Goodwill has generously provided SLSLS is invaluable, **securing our own office space** would give us a dedicated home base to support staff and manage operations. We also want to **invest in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system** to enhance operational efficiency.

We are focused on **conducting outreach to underserved communities**, especially in North St. Louis County. We are especially excited to **launch a hospital-based referral program**, connecting survivors identified by medical staff with SLSLS for legal support.

We hope to expand our reach, deepen our impact, and empower more survivors to find safety, justice, and a path to rebuilding their lives.

With your support, we can bring our future goals to life and continue standing with survivors of IPV. To donate, visit slls.org/donate or contact us to explore other ways to give.

 **St. Louis Survivors
Legal Support**
www.slls.org • 314-NOW-STOP