

# Legal Briefs

*News You Can Use from the City of Oakland Office of the City Attorney*

*Legal Briefs is a series of essays by City Attorney John Russo to update the community on key projects, major initiatives and important legal developments in the Office of the City Attorney.*

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## **NEIGHBORHOOD LAW CORPS ATTORNEYS READY TO HIT THE STREETS**

**By John A. Russo, City Attorney, City of Oakland**

When I campaigned to become your first elected City Attorney, I pledged to bring “community lawyering” into Oakland’s neighborhoods by creating a privately funded, innovative **Neighborhood Law Corps**. Inspired by the Peace Corps, the Neighborhood Law Corps is an embodiment of our motto in the Office of the City Attorney—*jus pro populo*—“law in service of the public.”

Last week, vision became reality. After completing two weeks of intense and vigorous orientation, five new Neighborhood Law Corps (NLC) attorneys were dispatched to serve some of Oakland’s most challenged neighborhoods: Brookfield and Eastmont in East Oakland, Lower San Antonio and Eastlake, the 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue corridor in Fruitvale, and McClymonds in West Oakland.

Each Neighborhood Law Corps (NLC) attorney will serve a two-year appointment to work in Oakland’s neighborhoods rather than in City Hall. NLC lawyers are City Attorneys who will work hand in hand with community members to identify and prioritize the most severe problems plaguing their neighborhoods. They will work with residents, schools, the faith community, local merchants, community-based organizations, the legal services community, and community activists to identify and remedy problems that fall within their jurisdiction.

Based on these community-driven needs, the attorneys will develop work plans focusing on two primary legal challenges: blight and code enforcement (including drug houses, illegal dumping, building code enforcement, vehicle abatement, liquor outlets, and hotel/motels), and toxic pollution. They will also provide consumer education workshops to assist community members in avoiding becoming victims of predatory lending or other unscrupulous business practices.

NLC attorneys will be involved in Oakland’s neighborhoods when problems first appear rather than waiting to react when a case finally gets to City Hall. NLC attorneys have been directed to coordinate cases with other City departments and public agencies, emphasizing problem solving in collaboration with residents.

When the program is fully integrated into City Hall and the community, we expect that the NLC attorneys will concentrate their efforts on 10 to 15 of the worst neighborhood

problems in each of the assigned neighborhoods in the course of a year. **The outcome will be safer, cleaner, and healthier neighborhoods in Oakland.**

One key distinction is that NLC attorneys are **not** legal aid or legal services lawyers. They are City Attorneys and represent only the City of Oakland. Nevertheless, we have already arranged for NLC attorneys to provide referrals for Oakland residents to other legal resources as needed.

### **Local Needs**

To put the need for legal resources in perspective: in 2000, the City’s Building Services Department received approximately 16,000 blight complaints; 5,000 involved tenant-landlord issues concerning housing and habitability; and, the other 11,000 were blight complaints. Building Services confirmed violation of the City’s ordinances in 12,800 (80%) of the cases.

The NLC attorneys will augment the four Deputy City Attorneys currently assigned to the Public Safety and Code Enforcement unit and dramatically expand the City of Oakland’s capacity to address the most serious quality of life problems in the neighborhoods. More importantly, it will allow the Office of the City Attorney to shift the assignment of legal resources from a City Hall-centered approach to a community-oriented, prospective approach.

### **Funding and Fellowships**

The Neighborhood Law Corps is funded by a local, private, non-profit foundation, the Neighborhood Law Corps Foundation, which provides grant funds in the form of “legal fellowships.” The NLC will offer attorneys a two-year appointment to perform public service law in Oakland. Their fellowships pay a salary of \$35,000 plus benefits. Some Law Corps attorneys may also take advantage of their schools’ loan forgiveness programs for performing public interest law.

### **Contact Us**

For more information about the Neighborhood Law Corps, contact any of the attorneys listed below or the program’s Executive Director, Alex Nguyen at (510) 238-6628 or [info@neighborhoodlawcorps.org](mailto:info@neighborhoodlawcorps.org).

<b>Neighborhood</b>	<b>NLC Attorney</b>	<b>Phone</b>
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West Oakland	Liam Garland	(510) 637-0352
Brookfield	Barbara Killey	(510) 637-0417
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