
HEALTH, LEGAL & SAFETY

District Legal Services Authority (DLSA)

WHAT THIS INSTITUTION IS

The District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) is the district-level arm of the national legal aid system constituted under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987. Its core function is to provide free legal aid and counsel to citizens who cannot afford a lawyer, specifically women, children, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, persons with disabilities, victims of trafficking or bonded labour ("begar"), persons facing mass disasters or caste / ethnic violence, industrial workmen, persons in custody, and anyone with an income below a state-prescribed ceiling (Section 12, LSA Act 1987). The DLSA organises Lok Adalats (people's courts) to resolve pre-litigation and pending cases through conciliation, runs legal awareness camps, provides legal aid lawyers to eligible applicants, and operates Village / Taluka Legal Services Committees as sub-units. For a young person, the DLSA is the most affordable entry point into the legal system — and yet remains one of the least known institutions in the district.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

If you, a family member, or a friend faces a legal issue — a dowry or domestic violence complaint, a wage dispute, a consumer grievance, a land dispute, harassment, arrest, or a pending civil case — and cannot afford a lawyer, the DLSA is the institution that will provide one free. Lok Adalats can settle disputes in a single hearing with no appeal, which is often faster and cheaper than regular courts.



GOVERNANCE

LAW / POLICY	SCOPE
Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987	Foundational law establishing NALSA, SLSAs, DLSAs, and Lok Adalats
National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) Regulations	Eligibility criteria, legal aid counsel empanelment, quality standards
NALSA (Victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation) Scheme	Rehabilitation, legal aid, and compensation
Victim Compensation Schemes under Section 396 BNSS (formerly §357A CrPC)	DLSA recommends compensation amounts for crime victims
Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015	Legal representation for children in conflict with the law through DLSA

- **Centre:** NALSA (New Delhi). Patron-in-Chief is the Chief Justice of India. Executive Chairman is a serving or retired Supreme Court Judge nominated by the President in consultation with the Chief Justice of India (LSA Act §3(2))
- **State:** State Legal Services Authority (SLSA). Patron-in-Chief is the Chief Justice of the High Court. Executive Chairman is a serving or retired Judge of the High Court, nominated by the Governor in consultation with the Chief Justice of the High Court
- **District:** DLSA headed by the District Judge as ex-officio Chairperson; Secretary is a judicial officer not lower in rank than a Civil Judge / Subordinate Judge, posted at the seat of the District Judiciary
- **Taluka / block:** Taluka Legal Services Committee headed by the senior-most Judicial Officer in the taluk (ex officio Chairman, per Act 37 of 2002)
- **Village:** Village Legal Care and Support Centre / Para-Legal Volunteer (PLV) network
- **Funding:** Statutory grants from the Central government to NALSA and State governments to SLSAs; district funding flows through SLSA

KEY POSITIONS

POSITION	RESPONSIBILITY
Chairperson (District Judge)	Policy and oversight
Secretary, DLSA	Full-time judicial officer heading day-to-day operations
Panel Lawyers	Empanelled advocates providing legal aid to eligible clients
Para-Legal Volunteers (PLVs)	Community-level volunteers trained in basic law; first responders for outreach
Front Office / Help Desk	Receives applications and provides immediate referral
Retainer Lawyer at every police station	NALSA scheme to provide legal aid at the earliest arrest stage



MANDATED SERVICES

- Free legal aid to eligible persons in all courts – from Supreme Court to district courts and tribunals
- Legal representation in criminal matters at the earliest stage through police-station-level retainer lawyer scheme
- **Legal Aid Defence Counsel System (LADCS)**: a NALSA Central Sector Scheme (since FY 2023-24) providing dedicated criminal-case legal aid; operational in over 680 districts as of late 2025. The LADC office sits within DLSA premises. DLSA, under SLSA guidance, selects counsels through a transparent process; engagements are on a 2-year contract with annual extension subject to satisfactory performance. SLSA in consultation with DLSA reviews each counsel's performance every six months
- Pre-Litigation Lok Adalats and Regular Lok Adalats – settle compoundable civil and criminal cases, bank recovery, motor accident claims, and utility disputes through conciliation; the Lok Adalat award is final and non-appealable
- Legal awareness and literacy camps in villages, schools, colleges, and workplaces – particularly on rights under the Domestic Violence Act 2005, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO), VB-G RAM G Act 2025 (which replaced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act / Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)), RTI, child marriage, labour laws, and citizenship rights
- Victim compensation schemes – DLSA processes recommendations under BNSS Section 396
- Legal aid clinics in law colleges – student participation in mentorship model
- Jail visits and representation for undertrial prisoners; parole and bail assistance
- Legal aid for women under Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and victims of trafficking

LINKED SCHEMES

- **NALSA (Legal Services to Victims of Sexual Assault) Scheme** – compensation and rehabilitation
- **NALSA (Child Friendly Legal Services) Scheme** – representation for children
- **Victim Compensation Scheme (state-specific)** – DLSA recommends compensation to District Magistrate for victims of crime
- **Lok Adalat Permanent** under Section 22B of the LSA Act – for public-utility services

HOW TO LOCATE

Portal: nalsa.gov.in (nationwide) and state-specific SLSA portals (e.g., upslsa.up.nic.in, doj.gov.in legal aid search, tnslsa.tn.gov.in)

Also: Located in the District Courts Complex; ask the Bar Association or the Sessions Court's front office. Every DLSA maintains a 24×7 helpline, often the same as the state NALSA helpline. Applications can also be filed on e-Legal Services Authority (e-LSA) portal for NALSA.

KEY FACILITIES

A functioning DLSA should have: a visible public help desk / front office inside or adjacent to the District Courts Complex, a list of empanelled panel lawyers with contact details, a scheduled Lok Adalat calendar, a dedicated Legal Aid Defence Counsel (LADC) office (operational in over 680 districts as of late 2025), a Para-Legal Volunteer roster with contact details for each block, a grievance register, and at least one jail-visit schedule per month.



WHAT A FUNCTIONING DLSA LOOKS LIKE

- Help desk is staffed during court working hours; at least one panel lawyer is assigned per working day
- Legal aid applications are acknowledged within 24 hours and representation is provided within 7 days
- Lok Adalats are held at least monthly, with visible schedule and case-disposal numbers
- Para-Legal Volunteers have conducted awareness camps in each block in the last quarter
- Victim-compensation recommendations processed last year are tracked with DM disbursal status
- Legal aid clinics in nearby law colleges are active
- Retainer lawyer scheme at police stations is operational (can be verified by asking at any police station in the district)

GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL

During service delivery. Grievances about legal-aid denial, panel lawyer non-performance, or Lok Adalat conduct are raised with the Secretary, DLSA, in writing.

After service. Escalation is to the Member Secretary, State Legal Services Authority (SLSA). The SLSA has monitoring powers over every DLSA.

External. NALSA accepts complaints at nalsa.gov.in. Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) handles grievances against the Ministry of Law and Justice at pgportal.gov.in. Bar Council of the State handles misconduct complaints against empanelled lawyers. Separately, the District Judge (ex-officio DLSA Chairperson) has administrative jurisdiction.
