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April 2024

Delivering Justice and Systemic Reforms for the Unsheltered

Individuals experiencing homelessness and living on the street are profoundly vulnerable and forced to keep their belongings on the streets, from sentimental items to crucial possessions such as identification documents and medications. The loss of these items can be devastating to their ability to achieve economic stability and access housing. In 2021, Legal Services received reports of the City of Miami violating its own policies by destroying personal property of people experiencing homelessness. Legal Services, Southern Legal Counsel, and ACLU of Florida recently reached a settlement with the City, safeguarding the belongings of unsheltered individuals.

In 2022, Legal Services and its co-counsel sued the City of Miami on behalf of four individuals experiencing homelessness. The lawsuit alleged the City unconstitutionally destroyed property during what the city refers to as "cleanup operations." The lawsuit revealed heartbreaking losses: identification papers, cherished mementos, even an urn carrying a mother's ashes, all destroyed unlawfully during city cleanups. One plaintiff even mourned the loss of a beloved pet cat, tragically killed during the operation. These stories traveled throughout the homeless community, instilling fear of further loss.

Just days before a trial, the parties reached a settlement. Under its terms, the City com-

mitted to substantial policy changes and \$300,000 compensation to the plaintiffs, including attorney's fees and costs. This settlement impacts over 500 unsheltered residents.

Crucially, the City pledged to enhance its notification procedures, ensuring clarity in multiple languages, and providing ample time for property relocation. Specifically, the City will post a "Notice of Removal" on property it deems contaminated or abandoned. The Notice will tell the property owner that they have 72 hours to move their property. When the City stores abandoned property or disposes of contaminated property, it will leave a Notice of Collection so the property owner will know what happened to their property and how to claim stored property. Photographing belongings before disposal

"... This settlement will reduce unreasonable property seizures by the city and provide more due process to people experiencing homelessness—rights guaranteed by the Constitution."

Jeffrey Hearne, Chief Advocacy Officer

and maintaining meticulous records aims to facilitate property recovery.

Moreover, these improved policies aim to lower barriers to housing, offering storage

options for essential items and better informing residents of available shelter resources. For example, when residents accept shelter placement, they will be given the opportunity to store certain items for up to 90 days, removing a common reason people refuse to go to shelter, where they are only allowed to bring limited personal belongings. As part of the settlement, the City agreed to train all employees who engage with homeless individuals on the new policies and to ongoing monitoring and reporting through June 2025, ensuring accountability and continued adherence to these crucial reforms.

This achievement didn't go unnoticed. Legal Services and its partners were honored as the 2nd Runner Up for the 2024 Goldstein-VanNortwick Award from Funding

Florida Legal Aid (formerly known as the Florida Bar Foundation), celebrating their tireless advocacy for justice. Attorneys on the case included: Jeffrey Hearne, Jocelyn Armand (Legal Ser-

vices); Jodi Siegel, Chelsea Dunn, Dan Marshall (SLC), and Stephen Schnably and Benjamin Waxman (pro bono attorneys from ACLU).



From the Chief Executive Officer Monica Vigues-Pitan

I am thrilled that a few of our innovative projects have recently been recognized for their impact on our most vulnerable community. I am beyond proud to announce we won in the ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) Impact category of this year's prestigious Daily Business Review's Florida Legal Awards and were among the finalists in the Innovators category.

ESG Impact: The Medical Legal Partnership is a collaboration with West Kendall Baptist Hospital, working alongside medical staff to pinpoint legal obstacles affecting health outcomes. Examples of health-harming legal needs are an asthmatic child experiencing frequent ER visits due to mold at home or a senior citizen wrongfully denied crucial medication by their insurance provider. In these scenarios, an attorney plays a vital role in ensuring the landlord addresses necessary repairs and filing appeals to cover the medication, so the patient receives essential treatment, respectively.

Innovators: The Miami Dade Eviction Diversion Project, a pilot program developed in collaboration with five partners including other legal aids, private bar associations and a nonprofit that specializes in community outreach and educates tenants. As lead partner, Legal Services receives referrals from our outreach partner, conducts intake interviews, refers cases to the other legal services providers, and provides critical advocacy and direct legal assistance. In less than one year, the project has provided legal assistance to more than 1,200 tenants. This effort allows us not only to leverage these organizations' expertise but also the pro bono services from the private bar.

Additionally, as you've read on the cover, Legal Services was also recently recognized for its advocacy on behalf of unsheltered individuals. I am incredibly proud of our dedicated team's accomplishments.

Your trust and support have been instrumental in our success. I am grateful for your commitment to Build a Community of Equal Justice!

Take the Next Step

You've received this newsletter because you've shown interest in our work and helping those less fortunate matters to you.

I'd like to ask you to take the next step: make a financial contribution to our work. A contribution—of any size—adds up to great impact. What matters most is that you're standing up to be counted—counted among the people in this community who care, and who get it. You get that it takes a village to fund the professional staff who do the day-in, day-out work of using the legal system to lift unfair burdens off the backs of thousands of our neighbors. And that makes us all better off.

Your financial contribution gets put to excellent use. Nearly 70% of every dollar goes to fund our full-time staff, who provide direct legal services to low-income members of our community. Legal Services' demonstrated competence has earned it greater responsibility. Last year the County Commission and Mayor awarded Legal Services a grant to expand our work representing low-income tenants from eviction. The grant has funded increased staffing to represent more people in need.

Unfortunately, that grant also reflects an increased need for our work. Finding affordable housing in this metro area remains a huge problem. Last year alone, Legal Services handled over 2,500 tenant's rights cases. There is no guarantee that government funding will be renewed. So, achieving our mission hinges on garnering greater community support. If people like you, who value making justice accessible to all, stand up to be counted, that broadened base of support will ensure our future work. I encourage you to take that next step by contributing today.

contributing today.

Stephen F. Rosenthal
Partner
PodhurstOrseck

CLICK TO GIVE



From the Board Treasurer Stephen F. Rosenthal



Legal Services Secures Compensatory Tutoring Services For Child With Autism

Frankie,* a middle school student diagnosed with autism, reads at a first-grade level despite having an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in place for several years. Frankie enjoys school, but, despite their best efforts, fell significantly behind following school disruptions caused by the pandemic. Frankie's current IEP did not adequately address this learning loss, and the school had failed to identify this issue and make the necessary changes.

Frankie's mother believes that her child has the intellectual capacity to be on the same level as their peers and wants them to have access to the educational services that will get them there and that federal law guarantees. She came to Legal Services for help, and, as a result of our advocacy, Frankie was awarded years of make-up tutoring services. With the specialized oneon-one tutoring Frankie will now receive, they will be able to acquire the skills necessary to access their public education and be successful in high school and beyond.

Legal Services Resolves Heirs' Property Issue For Disabled Senior



Wells Fargo's heirs' property funding enhances our efforts to promote intergenerational homeownership by allowing Legal Services to offer estate planning services to lower-income homeowners, who like Amelia*. are often elderly

but without legal protections in place to ensure the intended transfer of their homestead property upon death. Amelia, who is an 82-year-old disabled widow and had been living in her home for 15 years when she turned to us for help, wanted to leave her home to her daughter.

Because her home was titled in her and her son's name, we identified viable property transfer options to accomplish her estate planning goals.

As part of the plan, Amelia's son graciously agreed to grant his 50% legal interest in the home to his mother. In turn, she could then execute a Lady Bird Deed to transfer her home upon death to her daughter outside of probate. But before executing the appropriate deeds, we first obtained clearance from the mortgage company that these property transfers would not trigger the acceleration of her mortgage. Upon getting such reassurance, Amelia and her son executed



the necessary deeds which have since been recorded. Amelia now has the peace of mind that her home will pass to her daughter with ease.

*Clients' names and photos changed to protect confidentiality.

Celebrating Victory: Pro Bono Attorneys Obtain Tax Relief for Valued Veteran

After months of diligent effort, strategic planning, and dedication, we are thrilled to announce the successful completion of a complex tax case for a retired veteran.

Mr. Pouncy Jr. approached Legal Services with a request for assistance with his U.S. federal income tax debts in the amount of approximately \$14,000. He faced extreme economic hardship and would be unable to meet his basic living expenses and medical care should he have to pay the full amount of the assessed taxes.

Legal Services is grateful to a team of tax attorneys from the Miami office of Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP ("Weil") who took Mr. Pouncy's case. The Weil team included tax associates Renan Rodriguez and Jonathan Vita under the supervision of tax partners Devon Bodoh and Alfonso Dulcey. They resolved Mr. Pouncy's tax issues by developing and successfully negotiating with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service ("IRS") a settlement offer for Mr. Pouncy. As a result of their efforts, Mr. Pouncy's tax debts were settled for \$204, payable in five monthly installments. This accomplishment not only brings Mr. Pouncy financial relief but also highlights Weil's dedication to pro bono service.

"This outcome exceeded my expectations, and I am now able to move forward with financial peace of mind. I want to extend my sincere gratitude to Legal Services and each member of the Weil team who played a role in my case. Your professionalism, attention to detail, and unwavering support have made a lasting impact," said Mr. Pouncy.



"We take pride in being a trusted pro bono partner for Legal Services. It has been a true honor for us to serve Mr. Pouncy who has dedicated his life to serving our country, and we are grateful for the opportunity to make a positive impact on Mr. Pouncy's financial wellbeing," said Renan Rodriguez.









Weil

Renan Rodriguez, Esq. | Jonathan Vita, Esq. | Devon Bodoh, Esq. | Alfonso Dulcey, Esq.

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Donor levels reflect cumulative giving for the campaign period January 1, 2023 through December 31, 2025. As of 4/1/2024.

MEET OUR NEWEST PARTNER

Legal Services is thrilled to announce our new partnership with the Florida Blue Foundation! We received a \$288,000 multi-year grant from the Florida Blue Foundation to increase health equity by improving the cultural competence of our staff, so we can better serve our diverse community.





Making the Case in the Business Community

Miami's Climate Tech Future & Its Impact on Our Community



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"Climate tech can unleash endless possibilities that promote a more equitable and just Miami. ...

Monica Viques-Pitan

In March, we hosted our annual Business Breakfast Panel on Miami's Climate Tech Future. The panel discussion featured **esteemed experts who delved into the intersection of climate resilience, technology, and economic development**.

This year's theme underscored the importance of innovative approaches to address climate change while fostering economic growth and equity.

We express our gratitude to our panelists and our moderator, and to our host and sponsor, Greenberg Traurig.



- 1. In a recorded welcome video message, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava shared information on how Miami-Dade County is both at the frontline of climate change and bold climate solutions.
- 2. The all-female panel discussion provided an opportunity to highlight the positive impact this group of influential, industry leaders is currently making on the future of Miami by driving innovation and finding solutions at the start of Women's History Month. These women, who are at the forefront of understanding many of the challenges, issues, and opportunities that exist in climate tech, explained why Miami has the distinctive advantage to become a leader in this space.
- **3**. The informative panel discussion led to engaging questions from the audience. Pictured is Legal Services Foundation Board Investment Committee and Leaders Council Member **Marcos Segrera posing a question** to the panelists on capital allocation decisions.
- 4. Attendees ranging from different backgrounds including law, banking, and advocacy gathered to hear from experts and gained valuable insights into emerging trends, investment opportunities, and collaborative strategies to navigate the evolving landscape of climate resilience.
- 5. Dedicated Board leaders, D. Porpoise Evans (President) and Karen Lapekas (1st Vice President) pose with CEO Monica Vigues-Pitan.

Chesterfield Smith Society

ANNUAL FLORIDA BAR FEES ARE DUE SOON! Become a member of the Chesterfield Smith Society when you make a gift in lieu of pro bono. Chesterfield Smith devoted his life to making certain there is a level playing field for everyone and that the rights of the most vulnerable among us are protected with the highest quality of legal advocacy. Your support follows the legacy of Chesterfield Smith and places one more family on the path to economic stability.



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The Legacy Society is a testament to our community's commitment to justice and equality. Through planned giving, members ensure our mission thrives for generations.

By including Legal Services in your estate plans, you leave a lasting impact on social justice while enjoying tax benefits and easy giving options. Whether large or small, your contribution to The Legacy Society fuels our mission, safeguarding rights and dignity for all.

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New Legislation Encourages Charitable Giving

In 2024, Individual retirement arrangement (IRA) owners age 70½ or over can transfer up to \$105,000 to charity tax-free. Consult with your estate planner to learn about new possibilities under Secure Act 2.0 Section 307.

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS COUNCIL

The Young Professionals Council's mission is to advance access to equal justice by connecting young professionals through community involvement, service, and philanthropy. The Council members serve as active ambassadors in the community, volunteer time and services, and provide for clients in need.

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