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Why Access to Civil Legal Services Matters



By Ashleigh M. Backman
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While CBA members and policymakers advance Connecticut's Civil Gideon movement, establishing an important right to counsel in civil legal cases, Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut, Inc. (SLS) continues to work with the CBA in challenging the private bar to provide pro bono legal representation for our low income clients. Indeed, the demand for legal representation by this population continues to rise and cannot be met by just the legal aid programs alone.

SLS pro bono attorney and CBA member, Peter Appleton, of Appleton & Appleton LLC, accepted this pro bono challenge by representing a low-income father who had been victimized by his landlord.

Attorney Appleton successfully utilized the Connecticut Unfair Trade Practice Act (CUTPA) to secure a \$225,200 judgement in damages, plus an additional \$15,000 in attorneys' fees, against a landlord who unlawfully locked out this low income father and his family from their vermin-infested apartment, threw away the family's belongings—including personal identification and family photographs—and sent taunting text messages, containing photos of the dumpster, to the client's phone.

In his decision, Judge Grant H. Miller, Jr. found for the tenant on his counts of forcible entry and detainer and infliction of emotional distress, saying that for all the countless acts of "callousness, mean spiritedness and arrogance," he had seen in his 38 years of trial and jurist experience, this case offended him the most. The judgement is now on appeal.

Legal aid programs in Connecticut constantly balance funding shortages and the ability to meet the vast legal needs of Connecticut's low income population. This case illustrates the importance of willing volunteers to aid in the protection of the basic

human rights of Connecticut's low income residents. Without their help, many of the problems these residents face each and every day would go unresolved because legal aid resources are so limited.

This case's outcome is a perfect example of the positive and life-changing effects pro bono legal representation provides to Connecticut low income residents. It is a testament to the legal profession.

SLS Executive Director, Janice Chiaretto, noted the case's importance in the Connecticut legal community: "I hope this case serves as an inspiration to everyone in the practice of law considering pro bono. It

shows you can make a difference—you can achieve real justice no matter how poor your client may be."

SLS and the CBA continue to challenge CBA members to engage in pro bono legal services by advocating for low income residents confronted with clear injustice, but who are unable to afford private civil legal help. To learn more about SLS's pro bono opportunities, please contact SLS Pro Bono Attorney Manager Ashleigh Backman at abackman@slsct.org, or visit the CTLawHelp.org Pro Bono Portal at probono.ctlawhelp.org/catalog. **CL**

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