

**For immediate release**

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## **CA Agency Restricts Access to Critical Aid for Domestic Violence Survivors and Their Children**

*Lawsuit says victims can no longer access welfare program that helped them escape violence and begin new lives*

STOCKTON, CA – Velma M. was pregnant, homeless, and on the run with her four children. It had taken all the courage she had to end the nightmare of abuse she endured at the hands of her former partner. But now Velma was experiencing another kind of nightmare—living in a car with her children and staying up all night to protect them. She had escaped the violence, but her family was more vulnerable than ever.

The state of California is supposed to waive some of the draconian regulations governing its welfare program in order to expedite assistance to the victims of domestic violence. But the agency administering the state program was refusing to grant Velma—and countless other survivors—critical temporary assistance.

“We know what can happen if the victim of domestic violence is left without options and forced to return to her abuser,” said Alex Prieto, an attorney with Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County. “Denying these benefits puts both the survivor and her children at risk.”

Velma is a plaintiff in a lawsuit filed January 8 in Alameda Superior Court asking the court to halt the California Department of Social Services’ unlawful practice of denying benefits to victims of domestic abuse. The lawsuit was brought by a coalition of legal services organizations, including Neighborhood Legal Services, Western Center on Law & Poverty, California Rural Legal Assistance, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, and the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations.

“When welfare reform passed, the state recognized that victims of violence and their children might need waivers of program rules to stay safe, escape their abusers, and benefit from welfare’s safety net,” said Antonette Dozier, an attorney with Western Center on Law & Poverty. “Now the state agency has, in essence, rewritten the law—eliminating the benefit of flexibility for entire groups of domestic violence victims.”

Velma should have received temporary cash assistance for all four of her children. But because the Department of Social Services is refusing to grant waivers of debilitating regulations—among them a rule that denies aid to children conceived and born while their parents were already receiving assistance—Velma received assistance for just one child.

States across the country waive that rule when a child is born as a result of rape, or when the parent is a domestic abuse survivor. But the California agency now limits those waivers only to victims of domestic violence who participate in the Welfare to Work program—regardless of the survivor’s ability to work due to disability or immigration status.

It’s a catch 22 for disabled people like Velma, who was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder as a result of the abuse, as well as for undocumented survivors whose U.S. citizen children qualify for assistance but cannot receive it because their parents’ legal status prevents them from participating in Welfare to Work.

“The California Department of Social Services is supposed to protect these survivors,” said Cynthia Chagolla, an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance. “Instead it’s slamming the door in their face, and putting their lives—and the lives of their children—in danger.”

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## Organizational Information and Media Contacts

### **Western Center on Law and Poverty**

*Since 1967, Western Center on Law and Poverty has led the fight in California's courts, counties and capital to secure housing, healthcare and a secure safety-net for low-income children, women and men. Western Center's attorneys and advocates are the impact litigation lawyers for the poor and their voice in Sacramento. [www.wclp.org](http://www.wclp.org)*

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### **Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County**

*Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLSLA) is one of California's most prominent public interest law firms. Each year NLSLA provides free assistance to more than 100,000 individuals and families through programs that expanded access to justice for the poor and address the most critical needs of Los Angeles' poverty communities. [www.nlsla.org](http://www.nlsla.org)*

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### **California Rural Legal Assistance**

*Founded in 1966, CRLA's mission is to fight for justice and individual rights alongside the most exploited communities of our society. Through a network of regional offices and cross-cutting programs, CRLA provides legal services to over 32,000 low-income people annually. Our work impacts farmworkers, individuals with disabilities, immigrant populations, LGBT communities, women, children and families in rural areas. [www.crla.org](http://www.crla.org)*

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### **Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles**

*The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) has been the frontline law firm for poor and low-income people in Los Angeles County for 85 years. LAFLA seeks to achieve equal justice for our clients by changing lives through direct representation, systems change and community education. [www.lafla.org](http://www.lafla.org)*

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### **Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations**

*The Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations has been advocating for the impoverished persons, families and children of California since the early 1980s. We work in concert with legal services organizations throughout the State of California. CCWRO advocates on behalf of the poor through litigation, advocacy with the California Department of Social Services and the California Legislature.*