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Kern County Lawsuit Settles - Thousands of Indigent Residents Obtain New Welfare Benefits

FEBRUARY 4, 2016 – The Western Center on Law and Poverty, Irell & Manella LLP and Jennison & Dodds, LLP won a dramatic overhaul of Kern County's general assistance program on behalf of homeless and disabled residents unlawfully denied public assistance, named plaintiffs Hans Mills and Danny Bowen, and the California Partnership, a non-profit dedicated to serving low-income communities.

“This an important step towards bringing relief to the thousands of homeless people in Kern County,” said Western Center attorney, Antionette Dozier. “We hope that it will become a part of a larger plan to address homelessness and poverty in the County.”

In October 2013, the Western Center on Law and Poverty sued Kern County over its systemic and unlawful failure to provide statutorily-mandated aid to its poorest residents and petitioned the Kern County Superior Court to stop Kern County from denying general assistance in violation of state and federal law. The lawsuit alleged the plaintiffs' experience was illustrative of the 1,200 homeless residents of Kern County. After two years of litigation, Kern County agreed to settle the majority of issues. As part of the settlement, on February 2, 2016, the Kern County Board of Supervisors adopted new regulations and policies increasing the amount of aid while reducing the burden of obtaining that aid for indigent and disabled individuals.

The new regulations and policies will greatly benefit the poorest residents of Kern County. Indigent residents will no longer be required to go through a burdensome multi-stage application process to receive aid, which will now be available immediately. Kern County is also obligated under the new regulations to make numerous accommodations for disabled applicants and recipients, including the provision of transportation assistance for those in need and support in obtaining documents or information to submit an application for general assistance.

Hans Mills, Danny Bowen and the California Partnership are represented by Richard Rothschild and Antionette Dozier of the Western Center on Law and Poverty. Craig Varnen, Bryant Yang and Luke Burton of Irell & Manella LLP and Diane Dodds of Jennison & Dodds, LLP served as pro bono counsel.