



Press Release

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Persons with Disabilities Sue FEMA

Discriminatory Practices and Policies Deny Equal and Meaningful Access to Persons with Disabilities

(New Orleans, LA) On February 17, 2006 the Advocacy Center – Louisiana’s federally mandated Protection and Advocacy System for individuals with disabilities – the Mississippi Center for Justice, the Welfare Law Center, Inc and the Public Interest Law Project filed a class action suit in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana against the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). A hearing has been set for March 2 in Judge Duval’s court.

The suit challenges FEMA's failure to provide accessible temporary housing – often in the form of trailers. Trailers that have been provided lack wheelchair ramps, grab bars in the bathroom, wheelchair maneuvering room, and generally cannot be used by persons with disabilities. Many people who need accessible units continue to wait for trailers.

"FEMA failed to make accessible temporary housing available for individuals with disabilities, or to modify housing to meet accessibility needs, despite repeated requests," said Nell Hahn, Director of Systems Advocacy and Litigation for the Advocacy Center.

The suit seeks preliminary and permanent injunctions enjoining FEMA from (1) failing to provide accessible trailers on a timely basis to persons with disabilities; (2) failing to replace or modify trailers to accommodate persons with disabilities; (3) failing to provide adequate notice of the rights of people with disabilities to reasonable accommodations, and how to exercise those rights; and (4) terminating FEMA hotel payments for evacuees waiting for accessible trailers.

"This case is about stopping FEMA's discrimination against people with disabilities," said Cary LaCheen, Senior Staff Attorney with the Welfare Law Center. "Plaintiffs seek equal and meaningful access to temporary housing, which is what the law requires."

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The Advocacy Center protects and advocates for the human and legal rights of persons living in Louisiana who are elderly or disabled.

The Welfare Law Center, Inc. advances the cause of economic justice for low-income families, individuals, and communities across the country.

The Mississippi Center for Justice is a collaborative racial and economic justice law firm that practices community problem-solving approaches.

Established in 1996 to continue class action and other major advocacy efforts, the Public Interest Law Project also provides support, including litigation, policy advocacy, consultation and training for legal services and other public interest law programs in the areas of public benefits, housing, health, civil rights, redevelopment and community reinvestment.