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## **Los Angeles Legal Aid Groups Receive \$8.4 Million to Assist Poor Individuals and Families in Housing Cases**

*The collaborative effort is one of seven groundbreaking pilot projects changing the nation's legal landscape*

LOS ANGELES – Four prominent legal aid groups have been awarded \$8.4 million over three years to provide legal representation and other assistance to 15,000 people facing eviction in some of Los Angeles' poorest neighborhoods. The unprecedented program is one of seven pilot projects awarded funding today by the Judicial Council of California in a statewide effort to provide representation to individuals and families in high-stakes civil cases.

"We are honored to play a leading role in this historic effort to ensure California's poor will have a fair opportunity to be heard in our courts," said Neal Dudovitz of Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County, the lead agency in the collaborative. "We expect the pilot program will have a dramatic impact on homelessness in Los Angeles while improving housing conditions in low-income neighborhoods and preserving our limited stock of affordable housing."

The Los Angeles program, a collaboration between Neighborhood Legal Services, Inner City Law Center, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and Public Counsel, received the Judicial Council's largest award to launch the Eviction Legal Assistance Center at the downtown Stanley Mosk Courthouse, where more than 25 percent of the County's 70,000 Unlawful Detainer cases were filed last year by landlords seeking to terminate rental agreements. The program will focus on litigants from South Los Angeles, where housing resources are limited and many residents are at risk of becoming homeless.

"More than 18,000 poor families are evicted each year at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse with a majority not receiving any representation," said Legal Aid Foundation Executive Director Silvia Argueta. "For 30 years the Legal Aid Foundation's Eviction Defense Center has tried its best to help these families. Although we reach thousands of people each year, the need is greater than our resources. This grant creates a powerful partnership to increase representation."

Eligible litigants meeting income qualifications must also face a represented opponent in a high-stakes housing case. In the vast majority of the Mosk Unlawful Detainer cases, only one party has representation. Most frequently, the petitioner is represented, and the respondent is unrepresented and poor.

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**-Neal S. Dudovitz**

*Neighborhood Legal Services*

“At Inner City Law Center, we routinely see foreclosing banks illegally evicting tenants from apartment buildings; landlords illegally evicting low-income tenants for daring to complain about slum conditions; and families in danger of losing the homes where they have lived for decades because a single rent payment was late,” said Inner City Law Center Executive Director Adam Murray. “Without legal representation, most of these tenants are unable to present their claims in court and could end up on the streets. This innovative program recognizes that it is far more effective to ensure a fair and balanced court review of eviction proceedings, rather than deal with the human and financial costs of homelessness.”

The awards come less than two years after California signed into law a bill recognizing the importance of counsel in civil cases where fundamental human needs are at stake. The historic Sargent Shriver Civil Counsel Act (California AB 590), which established funding for the pilot projects, made California the first state in the nation to move toward a civil right to counsel, often called a civil Gideon, in certain housing, domestic violence and child custody cases.

“By passing the Shriver Act, California took a bold step to unlock the courthouse doors,” said Public Counsel President and CEO Hernán Vera. “Nearly fifty years after the Supreme Court recognized a basic right to counsel, access to justice is still an empty promise for millions of Americans living near the poverty line. Public Counsel is proud to be part of a national movement to deliver justice for all.”

The pilot project, funded by a slight increase in certain court filing fees, is expected to begin seeing litigants in January 2012.