

NATIONAL LAW CENTER
ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

Using the Power of the Law to Prevent and End Homelessness

December 2017

Maria Foscarinis
Founder & Executive Director

Dear Friend,

As the year comes to a close, and I reflect on our work at the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty in 2017, I want to share with you just a few stories of how your support made a difference in the lives of families experiencing homelessness.

As a mother of five who became homeless after losing her job, Juanita Rocha encountered barriers to keeping her son enrolled in his school in Laredo, Texas. The Law Center worked with Juanita to develop legal arguments for getting the school district to change its treatment toward homeless students. **Today, not only is Juanita's son attending his school, but the Laredo school district changed its policy so that all homeless children in Laredo receive access to the education they deserve.**

Maya Johnson (name changed to protect her privacy) was a refugee who came to the United States and received a Section 8 housing voucher. Because of Maya's limited English, she had no idea that her abusive husband was not paying the rent until after she was evicted from her home. After she left her husband, she applied for Section 8 housing again but was denied because of her eviction history. **The Law Center's advocacy that ensured the Violence Against Women Act and regulations protect housing rights for victims of abuse allowed Maya to finally receive a voucher—and she is now safely housed.**

And despite a lack of available shelters in Houston, Texas, Tammy Kohr was forced to leave her only home—a tent in a homeless encampment—after the city implemented a ban on camping in public. **The Law Center filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn the ban and won a temporary restraining order on behalf of Tammy and her fellow neighbors, effectively stopping police officers from forcing her to remove her tent until the lawsuit is resolved.**

These stories, and countless others, are why we at the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty keep moving forward with our vital work. After you read more about our progress and achievements, **I hope you'll feel inspired to give a generous year-end gift to keep the Law Center's critical work moving forward.**

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I'm proud to share with you our many successes in 2017, made possible by your past support of the Law Center. We know what causes homelessness, and we know how to prevent it. When we put that knowledge into the law, we can truly change thousands—even millions—of lives.

Defending the Civil Rights of People Experiencing Homelessness

Despite full shelters and a lack of affordable housing, cities across the country are passing and enforcing laws that effectively “criminalize” people experiencing homelessness, even though they have nowhere else to go. The Law Center is working on multiple fronts to challenge these cases, including in court, to protect the basic human rights of people experiencing homelessness. A person doesn't lose their constitutional rights simply because they don't have a home.

In June, the Law Center, with the ACLU of Texas and the law firm of Dechert LLP, filed a lawsuit in district court in Houston, Texas, challenging the city's bans on panhandling and outdoor encampments. Three months later, after police officers raided a homeless encampment and ordered homeless people to take down their tents, the Law Center was victorious in securing a temporary restraining order prohibiting the city from enforcing the bans while shelters continue to be full.

In July, together with Idaho Legal Aid Services and with pro bono support from Latham & Watkins LLP, the Law Center presented oral arguments in the Ninth Circuit Court in *Martin v. Boise*, challenging the city's ordinance that prohibits sleeping in public. This case, which gained national attention in 2015 after the U.S. Department of Justice filed a statement of interest in support of our arguments, is expected to be decided in early 2018.

And just last month, the Law Center, joined by Disability Rights California and the law firm of Fish & Richardson P.C., filed a class-action suit in San Diego, CA, on behalf of homeless people who continue to be fined and ticketed for living in RVs or other vehicles despite being unable to afford the city's high rents.

Not only is it unjust and a violation of basic human rights to punish homeless people for trying to survive, it's a waste of city resources. From the high cost of housing to lack of healthcare access, it's easy to see how just one unexpected circumstance can result in homelessness. People experiencing homelessness look to the Law Center for help, and we provide the expertise and resources that ensure we continue our winning track record in the courts.

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Supporting Homeless Families After Hurricane Disasters

The devastating natural disasters this year—from hurricanes in Texas and Florida to wildfires in California and the Pacific Northwest—forced thousands into homelessness. These tragic events particularly affected those who were already homeless before the disaster. Many were mistreated by post-relief service organizations, and sometimes even denied help altogether.

As I wrote in an opinion piece published by *Talk Poverty* soon after Hurricane Irma hit Florida, some residents in emergency shelters were forced to wear bright yellow bracelets to mark their status as previously homeless, and officials warned newly homeless hurricane victims to stay away from people with the yellow bracelets because they were “criminals, thieves, and drug users.” One woman described her experience with a local service provider this way: “They treated me like I was non-human, insulted me and others.”

That’s why the Law Center is working with a coalition of organizations to press Congress, HUD, and FEMA for an equitable recovery and to prevent such mistreatment in future disasters. The Law Center is also working to ensure that displaced children remain in the same school they were originally enrolled in—essential for educational continuity and stability. And we partnered with local advocates in Texas and Florida to conduct educational webinars informing attorneys and advocates of students’ rights under the McKinney-Vento Act.

Raising Awareness, Growing Our Numbers, and Maximizing Impact

The Law Center’s work in 2017 garnered in over 100 articles in national and local press, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, *Politico*, Fox News, local NPR, and more. Media outlets are increasingly looking to the Law Center as the go-to organization with expertise on homelessness.

Over 600 organizations and individuals endorsed our Housing Not Handcuffs Campaign, committed to raising awareness of the unlawful and inhumane practice of local governments to criminalize homeless people for sleeping, eating, or conducting other life-sustaining activities in public. To reach new supporters, the Law Center is active on Facebook and Twitter, having recently surpassed 10,000 followers who receive daily updates on our work.

And to maximize our impact, the Law Center partners with law firms and corporate legal departments to conduct high-impact pro bono projects that ensure equal access to both justice and opportunity. Already in 2017, thirty-three law firms and corporate legal departments devoted nearly 6,700 hours in pro bono legal research, litigation strategies, and direct legal advice on sixty projects, valued at over \$4.5 million in donated services. This means that every dollar you give allows us to leverage more donated legal support, multiplying your gift many times over.

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In the courts, in Congress, and in communities across America, the Law Center is making an impact, and your help makes it happen. Your past support made possible the successes I've shared with you, and so I want to thank you for standing with us.

I'm reminded every day why the Law Center is greatly needed as a voice for people experiencing homelessness. When I hear members of Congress looking to cut federal funding for critical services, or when uninformed political figures spread harmful myths about human beings living in poverty, I know we still have a long way to go. That's why we're working harder than ever to reach out, get our messages heard, and work on behalf of millions living without a home.

I don't know what new challenges 2018 will bring—the current Administration and Congress could continue their planned budget cuts and roll-backs of rights that will harm our most vulnerable Americans. But I can promise you this: our hard-working team at the Law Center will be as determined as ever to keep up the fight. And our ability to help alleviate homelessness, and the challenges people face during periods of homelessness, depends on continued support from people like you.

Please make a special year-end gift of \$150 or more to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty today, and help us achieve more victories on behalf of people experiencing homelessness as well as their children and families.

Thank you again for your support, and all of us at the Law Center wish you a joyous new year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maria Foscarinis". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Maria" being more prominent and the last name "Foscarinis" written in a continuous, flowing style.

Maria Foscarinis
Founder & Executive Director

P.S. I know this letter is one of many that you're probably receiving as the year draws to a close. I hope you will consider the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty in your year-end giving plans—your most generous tax-deductible gift today will ready us for 2018. Thank you.