

Law students provide legal protection for citizens with disabilities

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Jay Jensen, left, and Alexis Tringas, right, both third-year law students, recently negotiated a settlement for disabled clients with the Housing Authority of New Orleans. The agreement not only gave their clients a financial settlement, but also changed how HANO will work with handicapped patrons in the future. (Photo by Alina Hernandez)

People with disabilities receiving assistance through the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) will have an easier time keeping those benefits thanks to the help of two Tulane Law students.

Alexis Tringas and Jay Jensen, both third-year law students in the Civil Rights and Federal Practice Clinic, fought on behalf of two clients with disabilities who were forced to move or pay higher rents following sudden changes in agency policy that resulted in lower benefits.

While helping their clients meet HANO's demands, the students also prepared for a possible federal lawsuit.

Among the issues were that the agency did not provide residents notice of the changes, or offer a hearing before the reduction of assistance took effect, the students said.

"We felt this practice was discriminatory at its core, but others before us had filed complaints on behalf of clients and got nowhere," Jensen said. "We weren't sure how this would all play out."

By last Thanksgiving, Tringas and Jensen had been in contact with a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) investigator to work through the complaints, adjust policy and attempt to avoid litigation, Tringas said. The students, with the help of clinical faculty, had outlined a list of policy changes that would fix ongoing issues of program participants with disabilities.

On Dec. 6, Tringas and Jensen met HANO and HUD officials and negotiated an agreement that would not only compensate their clients for costs of their lost benefits, but also change policy.

"HANO's general counsel agreed to all our policy changes," Tringas said.

Those changes include the ability for clients to self-certify long-standing disabilities and the elimination of arbitrary lowering of benefits for participants, among other things. They also sought and received guarantees that HANO staff would have ongoing training on the new policy.

In an email about the experience, Tringas and Jensen wrote: "Advocating for our clients in the conciliation meeting was an invaluable experience. The meeting gave us an opportunity to negotiate with opposing counsel and fight for improvements to a vital public program that affects thousands of people in our community."

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