

NATIONAL LAW CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

Key Accomplishments: 2015

In 2015, the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty advanced an ambitious agenda to prevent and end homelessness—and to protect the human dignity and rights of people without housing. Your generosity made possible major victories and initiatives, including:

Our impact litigation protected basic rights and dignity:

- *Bell v. Boise*. We challenged a city law in Boise, Idaho that criminalized sleeping in public—despite the lack of housing or even shelter space. We advocated with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to support our position, and it filed a strong legal brief in our case, spurring other cities across the country to change their laws on sleeping in public.
- *Norton v. City of Springfield*. We successfully challenged the city’s ban on begging in public as a violation of free speech rights. For the first time, we applied a recent Supreme Court ruling to this context, and set important federal appeals court precedent. As a result, cities in other parts of the country have ceased enforcing similar laws.
- *Citizens v. Florida*. We challenged the state’s denial of adequate education to low income and homeless children through its inequitable allocation of resources.
- *Frank v. Walker*. We challenged the denial of equal access to voting for low income and homeless people as a result of the state of Wisconsin’s voter identification law.

Our strategic advocacy won new support and rights:

- Our strategic, long term advocacy paid off when key federal agencies took a strong stand against the criminalization of homelessness. In addition to the DOJ’s brief in our Boise case, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness released new guidance on encampments urging communities not to forcibly evict people but to house them instead.
- In addition, as a result of the Law Center’s advocacy, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development used the power of \$2.9 billion in competitive grant funds to discourage criminalization through its 2015 Notice of Funding Availability.
- At the city level, we worked with local partners to defeat criminalizing laws in Miami, Deland and Gainesville, Florida; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Madison, Wisconsin; and more.
- We won affirmative protections for the dignity and equality of people experiencing homelessness, including Homeless Bill of Rights introduced in Hawaii, California, Oregon, Colorado, Indiana, and enacted in Madison, Wisconsin, again working with our partners.
- We worked with local partners to win new state laws in Florida and North Carolina to protect vulnerable renters from homelessness.
- We protected the rights of homeless children and youth; our training, materials, webinars and impact litigation positively affected millions and directly reached at least 250,000 across the country.
- We held our National Forum on the Human Right to Housing: an invited group of attorneys, advocates, government representatives, formerly homeless individuals, and others

representing 70 organizations from across the country met to lay the foundation for a new campaign to redirect law and policy away from criminalization and towards housing—and create a new national network to support the campaign.

We conducted record outreach, helping thousands of providers and advocates:

- We launched Project LEARN, a national network of legal and technical assistance providers and advocates, to build local capacity to provide legal assistance to students experiencing homelessness and their families.
- We produced reports and manuals on, housing, education, and human rights. Our materials were downloaded 71,638 times in 2015.
- We held webinars in 2015 that educated 460 advocates, lawyers, and organizers in 46 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.
- We reached millions of people with our media outreach and coverage, shining a light on the needs of homeless Americans and supporting our work to shift policies and change systems, including coverage and an editorial in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, *NPR*, and *The Atlantic*.

The New York Times

Justice Dept. Presses Civil Rights Agenda in Local Courts
– August 19, 2015

“This month, the Justice Department told a judge in Boise, Idaho, that it was unconstitutional for the city to arrest homeless people for sleeping on the streets if the government did not provide adequate shelter space. “Criminally prosecuting those individuals for something as innocent as sleeping, when they have no safe, legal place to go, violates their constitutional rights,” Ms. Gupta said.”

The Washington Post

It’s unconstitutional to ban the homeless from sleeping outside, the federal government says – August 13, 2015

“NLCHP’s goal, Tars says, isn’t to protect the rights of people to live on the street, but to prevent and end homelessness. That means adding a lot more shelter beds and housing options in places like Boise – which has three shelters run by two nonprofits – so people have options other than the street.”

npr

Tide starts to turn against the ‘crime’ of being homeless – November 3, 2015

“We can’t really fight these battles city by city. It’s like putting out fires,’ says Foscarinis. ‘Now with the federal government taking a stance, I think we really have a chance of turning the ship around.’ And there are signs that’s beginning to happen. Several California communities have stopped enforcing their anti-camping laws to consider alternatives. And in Colorado last month, Denver, Colorado Springs and Boulder suspended panhandling ordinances after a federal judge ruled that one such law was unconstitutional because it violated free speech.”