

Settlement Agreement Leads to New Policy for Administering General Relief Benefits That Expands Access for Vulnerable Immigrants in Orange County

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contacts:

Melissa A. Morris
Public Interest Law Project
(510) 891-9794
mmorris@pilpca.org

Sarah Reisman
Community Legal Aid SoCal
(714) 571-5271
sreisman@clsocal.org

Orange County, May 23, 2023 – Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal) and the Public Interest Law Project (PILP), on behalf of their client, have reached an amicable settlement agreement with Orange County that will expand access to public benefits for vulnerable immigrants who are victims of crime, human trafficking, and domestic violence.

Pursuant to the agreement, Orange County will no longer deny General Relief to U Visa, T Visa, and VAWA applicants solely on the basis that they do not have a social security number, or have not applied for one. This change in policy best reflects the complicated reality that these immigrants must navigate: they have limited opportunities to apply for a social security number, and often must wait several years to apply for one. Now they can obtain much-needed General Relief that is critical aid for them to access the basic necessities of life.

Historically, Orange County required General Relief applicants to provide proof of their social security number, or proof that they had applied for one. If an applicant failed to satisfy this SSN Requirement, they were automatically denied benefits.

In 2022, CLA SoCal and PILP filed a lawsuit on behalf of their client—an Orange County resident who was denied benefits under the SSN Requirement—and named Orange County, Orange County Social Services Agency (OC SSA), the Director of OC SSA, and the Orange County Board of Supervisors in the suit. The lawsuit argued the SSN Requirement was inconsistent with the Welfare and Institutions Code, and it had a discriminatory effect on the basis of sex and national origin. In April 2023, the parties reached an amicable settlement that resulted in OC SSA revising its policy to create an exception to the SSN Requirement for all U Visa, T Visa, and VAWA applicants requesting General Relief.

“We commend the County for revising its policy to expand access to General Relief for U Visa, T Visa, and VAWA applicants. General Relief is life-changing aid that will help these individuals so they don’t go hungry or risk becoming unhoused,” said CLA SoCal Senior Attorney Erica Ettinger.

Melissa Morris, a Staff Attorney with the Public Interest Law Project agreed: “The revised policy will allow the County to distribute General Relief in a fairer and more equitable manner to all eligible applicants. U Visa, T Visa, and VAWA applicants will no longer be forced to wait months—or years—to be deemed eligible for General Relief because of the SSN Requirement.”