

# EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS®

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**Peter McGraw**

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Legal Aid  
Corpus Christi, TX**

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## SIX-MONTH FELLOWSHIP UPDATE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Peter is providing legal advocacy and conducting outreach to remedy the civil collateral consequences for residents of South Texas with psychiatric disabilities involved in the criminal justice system.

### NEED ADDRESSED BY PROJECT

The mental health system in Texas is severely under-resourced. People with serious mental illness are almost eight times more likely to end up in state jails than in state psychiatric hospitals. As a result, people with serious mental illness are drastically overrepresented in Texas's criminal justice system. The consequences of criminal justice involvement go far beyond the criminal case. An arrest can lead to eviction, loss of employment, and termination of public benefits. These civil collateral consequences are especially traumatic for people who receive community-based services and supports. People with mental health conditions deserve civil representation in addition to traditional criminal defense services to remedy the impact of these collateral consequences, avoid homelessness and hospitalization, and prevent recidivism.

### HIGHLIGHTS TO DATE

In the first six months, Peter has:

- Provided full direct representation to 17 low-income residents of South Texas with mental illness to help them obtain protective orders, avoid eviction, and ensure access to treatment
- Partnered with the Mental Health Coalition of the Rio Grande Valley, a grassroots advocacy organization, to help empower consumers of mental health services and their family members
- Established a direct legal referral service with community mental health centers in the Coastal Bend and Rio Grande Valley regions of Texas
- Collaborated with public defenders to provide more comprehensive legal service to indigent defendants with mental illness

### WHAT'S NEXT

In the next six months, Peter plans to:

- Expand access to affordable housing for people with mental illness by challenging restrictive criminal look-back periods at federally-funded housing complexes
- Develop educational materials for family members seeking guardianship, or an alternative to guardianship, for loved ones experiencing serious mental illness
- Increase his full direct representation caseload to 30 individuals with civil legal issues that are a direct or indirect result of a mental illness
- Recruit volunteer attorneys to expand the scope of the project