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Peter McGraw

**Texas RioGrande
Legal Aid
Corpus Christi, TX**

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ONE-YEAR 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 year, Peter has:

- Provided full representation to 48 individuals in housing, family law, guardianship, special education, torts and immigration cases
- Developed a direct legal referral service for caseworkers at local mental health authorities in the Coastal Bend and Rio Grande Valley regions of South Texas
- Collaborated with Texas-based nonprofit legal organizations to address systemic barriers to justice in Texas's juvenile justice system, such as ensuring legal counsel for juveniles with disabilities who are facing truancy charges
- Trained 100 mental health caseworkers on legal issues and how to advocate before the Social Security Administration and school districts

WHAT'S NEXT

In the next year, Peter plans to:

- Develop and distribute educational materials for consumers of mental health services and their family members on guardianship and appropriate alternatives
- Research municipal and housing authority obligations under the Fair Housing Act and work with low-income tenants to raise awareness of their rights
- Coordinate Texas RioGrande Legal Aid's (TRLA) representation of young people with disabilities in juvenile court with representation on special education issues to improve outcomes and set young people up to succeed
- Continue to provide full representation to a caseload of 30 low-income residents of South Texas with mental illness