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Catholic Charities USA Gulf Coast Immigration Project

The Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) submitted its first report to Catholic Charities USA summarizing the work accomplished in the first quarter under the Gulf Coast Immigration Project. The five diocesan immigration programs participating in the Immigration Project and covered in the report are: Catholic Charities of New Orleans; Catholic Community Services of Baton Rouge; Migration and Refugee Services of Lafayette; Catholic Charities, Inc. of Jackson; and Catholic Social and Community Services of Biloxi.

CLINIC initiated the project by holding a project planning meeting in Baton Rouge with representatives from each of the five programs. One of the Project's first steps was to secure a connection with Loyola Law School in New Orleans enabling staff from the five programs to refer immigrants with housing and employment issues to the Law School clinics. In addition, CLINIC's New Orleans staff attorney, Hiroko Kusuda, provided case management training and consultation to each of the five programs. CLINIC also hosted a training for the five programs on dealing with the media on immigration issues.

Each of the five programs began advertising for and hiring new staff to handle the additional casework from immigrants seeking assistance on issues involving housing, immigration, labor and criminal law. Catholic Community Services of Baton Rouge hired Attorney Kenneth Mayeaux who has previously worked as a litigator, Catholic lay worker with the poor in Mexico and as a chaplain for detained immigrants in Florence, Arizona. Catholic Charities of New Orleans hired Marco Balducci, a recent law school

graduate with experience in immigration law and fluent in English, Spanish, French and Italian.

The five programs had several client case success stories in the first quarter. Staff at MRS of Lafayette helped a Salvadoran family reunite after years of separation due to miscommunication with the National Visa Center. The Biloxi CSCS staff assisted a Cuban public interest parolee to obtain lawful permanent resident status after a ten year delay caused by a missed filing deadline. Catholic Charities of Jackson came to the rescue of a woman from Guyana who was stripped of custody rights of her baby. The baby's U.S. citizen father used his position as a lawyer to manipulate the mother's rights. The Jackson office is assisting the woman to obtain a "U" visa for victims of crime and to regain custody of her child.

New Orleans, Biloxi, Jackson, and Lafayette all experienced difficulty finding qualified candidates swiftly to fill the new staff positions to be funded by the Project. The programs will focus on hiring staff in the second quarter. Hiring and training new staff quickly is particularly important in light of the possibility that Congress will pass a legalization bill later this year. All five programs are doing outreach to immigrants in the hurricane devastated areas and need to be prepared for an influx of immigrants if the legalization bill passes. Public education is proving essential to prevent immigrants from giving money to unscrupulous people offering legal assistance before a bill even passes into law.

In the first quarter, CLINIC offered several training sessions to the Louisiana and Mississippi programs to help staff maintain and initiate Board of Immigration Appeals recognition and accreditation. In addition to immigration law, CLINIC offered a training on media exposure and communications. CLINIC also is identifying ways to broaden training for the programs to include labor, housing and criminal defense law. CLINIC is assisting the Lafayette and Biloxi programs to find an immigration case management software program to help the offices run more efficiently.

Attorney Hiroko Kusuda worked with a coalition including the National Immigration Law Center and the American Civil Liberties Union on the growing involvement of local police in immigration law enforcement. The coalition won a favorable decision from Louisiana's Fourth Circuit Court of Appeal challenging a state law that made driving without lawful presence a felony. A copy of the Coalition's amicus brief challenging the law can be found at:

<http://www.cliniclegal.org/Katrina/Materials/Barrientosamicicuriaebrief.pdf>.

Ms. Kusuda represents immigrants who have been arrested under this statute and persons arrested in the increasing number of Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids.

Ms. Kusuda is the liaison to ICE from the American Immigration Lawyers Association Midsouth Chapter. This position allows her to bring to ICE officials concerns about raids from the Project's diocesan staff as well as AILA members. Martin Gutierrez from Catholic Charities of New Orleans is able to bring diocesan program concerns about the ICE raids to the New Orleans city government through his membership on the New

Orleans Human Relations Commission and the New Orleans Police Department Community Relations Board.

CLINIC received additional funding in the amount of \$100,000 to sustain the Gulf Coast Immigration Project for a second year, serving immigrants in the hurricane devastated regions of Louisiana and Mississippi.

New Orleans Residents Protest the Demolition of High School

Residents in the New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward are protesting the planned demolition of the Alfred B. Lawless High School. The New Orleans Survivor Council and volunteers from the People's Organizing Committee are organizing in an effort to deter plans to raze the school. The demolition of the school is intended to make way for commercial development.

Volunteers have been meeting at the site of the school to salvage books, computers and other school equipment in an effort to encourage renovation.

[*CityBusiness* staff report (March 8, 2007)]

Federal Bill Would Block Demolition of New Orleans Public Housing

A House Committee is expected to approve a bill that would block the demolition of public housing developments in New Orleans until the Department of Housing and Urban Development produces a plan to replace the units. HUD would be required provide enough housing to accommodate the former public housing tenants who want to return to the city by August 1st. The full House should vote on the bill by the end of March.

A separate bill, introduced in early March and dealing with Road Home grants, includes a provision for 4,500 low-income housing vouchers along the Gulf Coast to help low-income persons pay rent. However, more than half the affordable rental housing in New Orleans was wiped out by Hurricane Katrina. For this reason, three thousand of the vouchers would be designated for Louisiana and could be used by developers to finance construction and restoration of badly needed affordable housing.

U.S. House Representative Barney Frank noted that most of the bill, with the exception of the 4,500 vouchers, does not offer additional federal aid, but unlocks obstacles to spending money that has already been provided. The 4,500 rental vouchers would require a separate appropriation that complies with the House Democratic mandate to ensure that new spending or tax cuts do not add to the federal deficit.

Another provision of the housing voucher bill would make permanent the temporary Section 8 vouchers given to Hurricane Katrina victims.

[*The Times-Picayune*(March 8, 2007)]; *NOLA.com*]

Federal Court Denies HUD's Motion to Dismiss Housing Residents' Complaint

On February 6, 2007, U.S. District Judge Ivan Lemelle denied requests by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) to throw out a lawsuit filed by public housing residents. The residents filed a lawsuit last June alleging that HUD's approval of a request by HANO to demolish hurricane damaged public housing of former residents was unlawful. Additionally, the suit alleges that the defendants have failed to make the minor repairs necessary to make the units habitable in violation of the law. The judge ruled that residents have a right to a trial on claims of constitutional Due Process and lease violations.

Judge Lemelle ordered a trial on the issues of the number of units that are habitable, the extent of repairs needed to make apartments habitable, the number of residents who wish and are able to return, and the inadequacies of the current voucher program. The trial date has not been set yet.

[www.justiceforneworleans.org; decision posted Feb. 6, 2007]

Suit Filed in New Orleans Over Incarceration of Poor

The ACLU filed a suit on February 27th in U.S. District Court against the New Orleans' Municipal Court, alleging that the rights of poor defendants have been violated by being jailed immediately when they cannot pay misdemeanor fines. The ACLU is seeking class-action status for all defendants jailed as the result of being too poor to pay misdemeanor fines, while those with money can simply pay to get out of jail.

Pamela Metzger, director of the Tulane Criminal Law Clinic, said persons arrested for such common misdemeanor offenses as begging, public intoxication and obstruction of public passage ways typically are in need of mental health treatment. After Hurricane Katrina, however, mental health resources are in extremely short supply in the New Orleans area.

[www.justiceforneworleans.org "New Orleans Justice News"]