CRLA provides a wide array of legal services that directly touch thousands of low-income Californians and indirectly impact the lives of many more community members.

Through improvements in workplace protections, reductions in public benefit denials, enhanced county planning for affordable housing, and decreased exposure to harmful pesticides, CRLA is changing the social landscape and bringing dignity to the struggles of low-income people.

Every year our team of lawyers, community workers and support staff reach 48,000 individuals. That reach is multiplied by the many households and communities connected to those individuals.

Make our impact even greater, make a donation online www.crla.org

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<td><strong>Leadership Development</strong></td>
<td>Promoting leadership and civic engagement to help low-income communities engage in effective self-advocacy.</td>
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Cover photos courtesy of David Bacon
Q: What is your connection to the communities CRLA serves?

JOSE

I was raised in a rural, segregated community in Imperial County where CRLA has a regional office. Poor Mexicans, African Americans, and a sprinkle of poor whites lived on one side of the tracks while the rich white growers, cattlemen, and bankers lived on the other side. My grandparents and relatives were farmworkers, and my mother recalls riding the cotton bag that my grandfather pulled through the fields as he picked cotton. We grew up with strong values tied to faith, our culture, and community.

BLANCA

My parents were migrant farmworkers in the 70s. They would put me on a blanket near the field and take turns with other workers watching me. I’m the oldest, so I became the translator for many people in our community. My family was poor, but we were very politically active, going to marches or forums. When I saw anti-immigrant sentiment or saw propositions attacking immigrants on the ballot, I took it personally. And as a woman, I think I have a close connection with my Latina clients because of our shared cultural experiences.

ADRIAN

I grew up in East Los Angeles and in a mining town called Clifton, Arizona. The town was “owned” by a corporation that ruled with an iron fist. They called the elections, ran the utilities, and owned the housing, so when workers went on strike they’d get kicked out of their homes. Much of what I learned about power and the lack of power, I learned there.

ANDRES

I grew up in Oxnard, and my mom’s grandparents and parents were farmworkers. But my dad grew up in East Los Angeles. Both of my parents went to college and were very active in the student movement. My dad actually worked for CRLA as a lawyer when I was a kid, and I originally didn’t want to be a lawyer because I thought it was so boring. But when I was older, I saw how many people came to my dad for legal advice, and I began to see just how powerful the law was.

Q: How does this connection translate into your commitment to CRLA?

JOSE

Injustice was something that I lived daily—the mistreatment of farmworkers, segregation of ethnic communities, seeing how hard it was and still is for ethnic youth to get an education and break the cycle of poverty. So when I went to university, I promised to return and practice my profession. When CRLA placed me in Imperial County, I planned to do this only for five years, but it became my whole career. The past 30 years is intertwined with everything I learned growing up.

ADRIAN

I saw what was happening in our community, and I developed a very strong sense of right and wrong. The parents of a little girl my brother liked said they didn’t want her seeing “that little dark boy” anymore, yet they had a bumper sticker that read “good neighbors come in all colors”! These types of injustices that happened to us and our families still burn in me. In college, I decided to give back to my community, especially to the poor living in rural areas. So I ended up in Imperial County with José. I continue to help CRLA in my practice through litigation, and I’ve served on the board for 20 years.

Q: How is CRLA preparing the next generation of leaders to work in our communities?

BLANCA

I’ve been given opportunities to argue cases or write briefs that I wouldn’t have been able to do anywhere else. CRLA gives me the room and space to grow. And it’s not just the attorneys. We all sit at the table—community workers, support staff, and attorneys—we all have a voice in how things are done.

ANDRES

I’ve only been with CRLA for three years, but senior staff trusts me to do the work and to work hard, and they’ve also encouraged my dreams to change my community. And I’ve been trying to pass that encouragement and trust on to summer interns.

If you or someone you know is interested in a fellowship or internship at CRLA please visit http://crla.org/fellowships
A lot of town people call it a slum,” says Debra Hollingshed, a resident of Matheny Tract, an unincorporated community near the City of Tulare in the Central Valley. “When I drive by, it’s where I live. It’s what we can afford. We pay taxes just like everybody else.”

Debra’s friends and fellow community leaders, Ofelia Zaragoza and Irene Paredes, agree.

“People even throw garbage here,” says Ofelia. “They think it’s a dump.”

“They call it a ghetto,” adds Yesenia, Irene’s daughter. “They think we should be bulldozed.”

It’s this image that these women and other members of their community have been striving to change over the past year as they work to fight for the respect and the seat at the decision-making table their community deserves. For years, Matheny Tract residents—a diverse group of Whites, Latinos and African Americans—have been overlooked and ignored as the city and county of Tulare made decisions affecting them. One of the decisions, locating a sewage treatment plant nearby, left the community smelling foul on warm spring and summer days. This was especially infuriating given the community isn’t connected to the sewer system.

The Tulare County Local Area Formation Commission (LAFCO) took note of this historical exclusion when residents first raised their voices in the spring of 2010 to complain about the City of Tulare’s plan to annex nearly 500 acres of land for heavy industrial use between the city and Matheny Tract. The city made minimal effort to inform or solicit the community’s opinions before CRLA’s Community Equity Initiative (CEI) team stepped in to level the playing field.

With help from the CEI team, residents learned about their rights, successfully preparing and arguing their points in front of the commission. The diverse group of residents overcame their differences—after emotionally tense conversations—to achieve a positive result for their community.
“When I drive by, it’s where I live. It’s what we can afford. **We pay taxes just like everybody else.**”

The outcome? LAFCO attached unprecedented conditions on the annexation approval requiring the city to:

1. work with Matheny Tract residents to connect them to city water and sewer systems;
2. actively seek funding for improvements,
3. notify all residents in both English and Spanish regarding any issue related to annexation in easily understood terms, and
4. pay for the annexation petition submitted by 25 percent of Matheny Tract property owners (the high cost was considered a barrier to the low-income community).

“Before this happened, residents didn’t have community meetings,” says Sofia Corona, a CRLA Community Worker with the CEI team. “Now, they’re meeting once a month, creating a sense of community that hadn’t been there before. They’re dealing with difficult issues and working through racial and language barriers. When they don’t agree on issues, they’re still coming together as a community, having tough conversations, planning how they’re representing themselves and fighting for their rights.”

“We’ve learned that when we stand as a group, the city and county can’t ignore us,” says Debra. “Before we started meeting, I didn’t know Irena and Ofelia because they speak Spanish and I speak English. But CRLA is helping us overcome that. We all want similar things.”

“We’re not asking for much, we just want what’s necessary,” adds the group of women. “Things like paved streets, streetlights, and clean drinking water. The things that other people want.”

“What other people already have,” says Yesenia. “And we don’t want to be bulldozed.”

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1 The initiative, funded by the California Endowment and Open Society Foundations concentrates on infrastructure deficits in unincorporated communities and the associated lack of political representation of those communities, where nearly half a million Californians live.
“[She] told us to get out. She made us feel like we were less than people. We didn’t know what to do. They showed no compassion, even with my husband’s condition.”

“The real estate agent spoke to us harshly,” says Juan Peral Martinez in a halting voice, struggling to enunciate each word clearly enough for the interpreter. After suffering a debilitating stroke that paralyzed him on one side several years ago, it is difficult for him to talk. “[She] told us to get out. She made us feel like we were less than people.”

“We didn’t know what to do,” says Mrs. Peral, starting to cry as she recalls their situation. “They showed no compassion, even with my husband’s condition.”

“When the Perals came to our office, I was on my way out to an appointment,” says Jessenya Hernandez, Staff Attorney in CRLA’s Modesto office. “It was heartbreaking. Here was this elderly man in a wheelchair, shaking and sweating and his wife sitting next to him, fearing that her husband was going to die because of all this. So I told them to go home, that I would come to their house after my appointment.”

“When I got there, Mrs. Peral was throwing things in boxes. They were so scared, like they were fearing for their lives, because they had nobody to help them.”

Over the next 12 hours, Jessenya pieced together the story, talking with the Perals, the lawyer for Wells Fargo, and the sheriff’s office. First, their landlord had defaulted on his mortgage. Then two 30-day eviction notices were served on the property, one for the main unit and one for the Peral’s studio apartment. The landlord helped the Perals file an answer and pre-judgment right to possession, but he did it for the main unit that was no longer occupied. Then the landlord disappeared.

A few weeks later, the realtor told the Peral Family she’d seen the sheriff’s lockout notice on the main unit’s door; they were going to be kicked out in two days. Then the missing landlord showed up later that day, while trying to rent the main unit to other unsuspecting people. He also saw the notice, told the Perals about CRLA, and then disappeared again. The next day, the Perals talked with Jessenya, but the clock was ticking.

Despite multiple calls and Jessenya’s efforts, Wells Fargo refused to give them more time. When Jessenya went to the Peral’s home, the sheriff had already been there to kick them out, but seeing Mr. Peral’s condition, had convinced the realtor to give them until the end of the day to leave. The realtor just wanted them out, saying that her client, Wells Fargo, had the right to start
When Pedro Garcia lost his job, he and his wife, Raquel, a house cleaner, fell behind on house payments. The bank sent them letters written only in English, and they kept going to the bank to find out what they meant. When the bank began using the word “foreclosure,” Pedro and Raquel got scared.

“We would go to the bank, and they would find someone to speak Spanish with us,” says Raquel. “But they wouldn’t even tell us what our options were, they just kept telling us to send our payments in. And they wouldn’t talk to our grown children because their names weren’t on the loan.”

The Garcias owned their home for 15 years. To think that they were on the verge of losing it was overwhelming. Finally, after a year of frustration and fear, they were referred to CRLA.

“We could see how they were getting the runaround,” says Dylan Saake, Directing Attorney at CRLA’s Marysville office. “Despite the fact that Mr. Garcia had become reemployed after their hardship, the bank was not going to help them out.”

“It took us two years from start to finish,” says Sonia Garibay, a Community Worker in the Marysville office who helped the Garcias through the process. “There’s so much paperwork and all the time spent sitting on hold, only to find out that bank employees from different departments give you conflicting information. The Garcias would never have made it through without help. They would have lost their home.”

“In the end, it wasn’t just about saving their home,” says Dylan. “The process uncovered another issue. Mrs. Garcia is an independent contractor, working for a cleaning service agency that wasn’t paying her correctly, so she couldn’t show an accurate account of her income. Sonia showed her how to do a profit and loss statement for her small business, get the proper income paperwork from her contract employer, and keep her records in order.

“Even after the new contract was signed off, we continued to advocate for them. At one point, the bank threatened to void the contract unless the Garcias sent in more paperwork, and I had to step in and tell them that’s not how contract law works. In the end, the bank backed down.

“The way I figure it, Sonia not only kept the Garcias in their home with a manageable house payment, but also saved them thousands of dollars over the remaining life of their loan!” Dylan continued, “They’ve come in to the office multiple times, thanking Sonia for her work. Each time, they’re standing a little taller.”

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1 The renters in the main unit had previously accepted a “cash for keys” deal from the realtor. The Perals had been offered the same deal at the time, but they told the realtor that they wanted to stay the full 90 days required by law, because it would take them time to find another place that would accommodate Mr. Peral’s disabilities.

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“enjoying their property” immediately. The Peral’s neighbors were a lifesaver; they asked the elderly couple to stay with them until things were sorted out.

“I made more calls, worked on the pleading for the court, and helped the Perals pack that afternoon,” says Jessenya. “And I was there with them when the realtor came back to lock them out.”

“It was heartbreaking. Here was this elderly man in a wheelchair, shaking and sweating and his wife sitting next to him, fearing that her husband was going to die because of all this.”

It was the week of Thanksgiving, and instead of heading out to visit her family as planned, Jessenya worked to get the Perals back into their home. The day before Thanksgiving, the court agreed that there clearly had been a mistake and told opposing counsel to settle the issue since the Perals shouldn’t have been kicked out. The final agreement put the Perals back in their home immediately, allowed them to stay through the holidays and until January 15, 2011, without having to pay rent, and removed the record of eviction against them.

Jessenya is working with the housing authority and apartment complexes to give the couple priority in finding a wheelchair accessible place. Although they’re still living with their neighbors while they wait, the Perals are eager to settle in a place they can call home. Mrs. Peral dreams of “a place with roses, a garden, a place where I can plant some chilies and tomatoes, some squash. I would be very happy in a place where my husband can roll out and see the garden.”
“The opportunity to tell the story that needs to be told...
when we get to the point of changing the story, it will be profound...
giving us a place of healing and empowerment for our young people.”

Since last year’s story on the Fund For Rural Equity (FFRE), things are on the fast track for Fathers and Families of San Joaquin County and for Sammy Nunez, its Executive Director. They received a grant from the city of Stockton to operate the Gary and Janice Podesto IMPACT Teen Center, and Sammy was awarded a California Peace Prize by the California Wellness Foundation.

“It’s a huge honor, but it’s a bittersweet kind of thing,” says Sammy. “It’s unusual for someone like me or our community to get that kind of recognition, and it gave us the opportunity to tell the story that needs to be told. But with all of the homicides in Stockton, when we get to the point of changing the story, it will be profound. The grant for the IMPACT Teen Center may help us do just that by giving us the opportunity to turn it into a place of healing and empowerment for our young people.”

Fathers and Families is one of nine FFRE grant recipients, a re-granting program administered by CRLA, now in year two of a three year commitment. Early this year, the group spent a day in Fresno with grant makers, CRLA, and Compass Point staff developing deeper professional relationships, learning more about the fundraising development process, and assessing their organizational capacity using a tool developed by Compass Point called My Healthy Organization.

Participants also practiced their funder presentations and were asked to provide feedback regarding their most urgent capacity building needs. Grantees noted that they would like assistance with fiscal management, board development, and overcoming the isolation and geographical challenges inherent in more rural areas. CRLA will use the feedback to coordinate future assistance via Webinars, or other means, throughout the remaining years of the grant period.
Another grantee, Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO), an organization providing critically needed translation and support services for California’s burgeoning indigenous communities, has leveraged FFRE funding to obtain a grant from Hispanics in Philanthropy.

“We intend to use the funding to recruit people who are interpreting in the indigenous community on an informal basis and provide an intense 40-hour training,” says Leoncio Vasquez, CBDIO’s acting Executive Director, “so we can cover topics related to legal and medical terminology and confidentiality issues.”

“CRLA has long been committed to building capacity for self-sufficiency in our clients.”

“CRLA has long been committed to building capacity for self-sufficiency in our clients,” says Mike Courville, CRLA’s Director of Planning and Development. “As an extension of that commitment, CRLA is using this funding to help organizations grow and be more effective in serving the communities we serve. It’s an investment that ties directly into our mission and strategic plan. And by default, we also have the opportunity to be more reflective about our own internal practices, our own strategic planning, as we help others through this process.”

Over the next two years of the program, CRLA will work with Compass Point to develop a rural leadership education module and with Zero Divide to help organizational grantees develop Internet-based systems solutions.

“Right now, we’re talking with our grantors to see how we’ll proceed after this first cycle of the FFRE,” says Mike. “Ideally, we’d like to establish the Fund for Rural Equity as a permanent grant making program with additional funding coming from other foundations and private donors.”

This type of extended commitment would help community-based organizations like Fathers and Families of San Joaquin develop more fully and ensure success in fulfilling their long-term goals and missions.

Through the Fund for Rural Equity, Sammy and other community leaders will have the support they need long into the future to do just that.

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1 FFRE is supported by a grant from The Community Leadership Project, funded by The David and Lucile Packard, James Irvine, and William and Flora Hewlett foundations. Each of the grantees, serving low income and communities of color in the San Joaquin Valley or the Central Coast counties of San Benito and Santa Cruz, received three-year grants plus access to management, planning, and legal training services normally accessible only to much larger nonprofits.

2 My Healthy Organization – an assessment tool that measures the eight components of organizational capacity: purpose; priorities and planning; structures and practices for leadership management; people; systems; evaluation and quality; organizational culture and relationships; and community engagement and accountability.

3 Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities.
“They were only quick to collect rent. One month, when I told them I was only going to pay half our rent because I had fixed the places where the trailer was deteriorating, they gave us an eviction notice.”

“I went by the motel the day after they had kicked everyone out,” says Jeannie Barrett, Directing Attorney at CRLA’s Santa Maria office. “Belongings were stacked by the dumpster, and one little boy was pawing through things, like he was looking for his favorite toy. I was so angry I took a picture and showed it to the city attorney and said ‘look what you’ve done!’”

Jeannie’s anger was justified. Not long before the eviction, the city had asked CRLA to help them with a three-pronged approach to improve the living conditions for families residing in the motel and RV park operated by Dario Pini, one of the largest rental property owners in the Santa Maria area. The city and county were going to prosecute Pini for unfair business practices and code violations while CRLA would work with the tenants. CRLA agreed to do their part, but ended up “holding the bag” when the only aspect of the city and county’s approach that came to fruition—a crackdown on code violations—forced the immediate eviction of tenants with no reasonable plan for their relocation.

On the Friday before the fateful day, the city called CRLA to say they were going to do an inspection of the motel the following Monday.

“It was President’s Day, a holiday,” recalls Jeannie. “We were supposed to be closed, but Mary Jacka (CRLA Community Worker) and I decided to be in the office and available. We were told at 3:00 p.m. that the city was going to red tag every unit in the motel. They never asked the tenants if this was going to be convenient or reasonable for them, they didn’t check out the conditions of the places they were sending them to. Many had no real means of moving on such short notice, so their things were tossed in the trash. I remember seeing a family’s dinner abandoned warm on the stove, because they quickly gathered what they could carry and left the unit. It was chaos.”

A code enforcement officer quoted by KSBY News in Santa Maria, said that “this is one of the worst [rental properties] that I have personally seen in the city.” It was ironic then that many of those evicted ended up living in places that were even more dire. The residents living in trailers in the motel’s parking lot were also evicted, leading the people in the neighboring RV park to believe, justifiably, that they were next. Their living conditions were often no better than those in the condemned motel.

“We had two doors on our trailer,” says Victor Espiridion, a resident of the RV park. “The back door wouldn’t open from the inside, and the front door couldn’t be fully closed or locked, so we used a chain to keep it from opening all the way at night. We had a possum under the kitchen sink, roaches and rats eating in the kitchen, and snails in the corner of the trailer where water leaked in. And we had no heat.”

“The gas leaks in the stove were the only things the maintenance people did anything about,” adds Maria Carvajal, Victor’s wife. “I ran from the trailer once with my sleeping son in my arms when my older son came
home and smelled gas. He quickly turned off the tank and called maintenance. My daughter was terrified to sleep at night, afraid that one of the homeless people who wander through the park would come in, so I slept on the sofa in the living room to help her go to sleep.”

“They were only quick to collect rent,” says Victor, “One month, when I told them I was only going to pay half our rent because I had fixed the places where the trailer was deteriorating, they gave us an eviction notice. That’s when I started talking to our neighbors and found out about CRLA.”

“There’s almost a zero vacancy rate in the Santa Maria area,” says Jeannie, “And it’s gotten worse over the past 20 years. More people are living in deplorable conditions in garages or overcrowded units because tenants have no options. They put up with it, because landlords know that if one tenant leaves, someone else with no options will take their place. Every five-year planning period they overproduce higher income housing and under-produce low or very low income housing. And the demand for affordable, low income housing just keeps building.”

Between President’s Day and June, 2009, CRLA worked to prepare and file a complaint, representing 62 plaintiffs1 in the lawsuit against Pini. And over the course of a year and a half, Sandra Aguila, a Community Worker and volunteer, kept the families organized and informed, a monumental task. In the end, it turned out to be the largest settlement ($1 million, reported by KSBY News) in Jeannie’s 30-plus years with CRLA. The group shared the award, ranging from $10,000 to $110,000,2 based on the amount of time residents had lived there.

Money was put into individual trusts for the children involved in the settlement. During the hearing, the judge leaned over and asked one little boy if he was going to use his money to go to college when he turned 18. The little boy shook his head and said, “No, I’m going to university!”

Some families used a portion of their settlements to move into better rental properties requiring larger security deposits, often a barrier for individuals with limited credit histories. Others, like Victor and Maria were able to buy a house.

“The children are so happy now,” says Maria. “They have their own bedrooms, a yard to play in. No more possums or gas leaks. We have heat. And my daughter can sleep at night. She smiles now and isn’t afraid.”

“There’s that intangible thing that happens,” says Jeannie. “People initially come into our office beaten down. They live in a horrible place, and know it is horrible and that their children are suffering, but they have no hope, no money to do anything else. To see this happen is just life-changing.”

And it may be life-changing for those not directly involved in the case as landlords throughout the tri-county area take note of this settlement and begin to improve the living conditions for their tenants.

CRLA, defender of families’ rights to safe and decent housing in California, believes this is a basic human right—one that should include tenants, not just landlords.

1 Long-time CRLA board member Adrian Andrade represented a second group of plaintiffs who didn’t qualify for CRLA’s services.

2 Award amounts reported by KSBY News are a matter of public record.
"He would squeeze my throat, bruise my legs, and punch me in the face," says Leticia. "I’d want to call the police, but he would grab the phone and tell me again and again that the police would take away my kids. He said I didn’t have a right to my own children because I wasn’t a legal citizen. And he threatened to take me far away and bury me where no one would ever find me."

This was Leticia’s life for over a decade, starting when she was 17. She had two children with her husband—a son, now age 14, and a daughter, age 7. It wasn’t until her daughter began attending the Head Start pre-school program that the domestic violence was noticed by an observant social worker, who asked the three-year-old if her father ever hurt her mother. Once the girl confirmed her suspicions, the social worker told Leticia that her life was in danger and that the children were being harmed by witnessing the abuse. She said Child Protective Services would remove the kids from the home if Leticia didn’t.

With this incentive, Leticia finally mustered the courage to come forward. She called the Monterey Rape Crisis Center and was referred to CRLA.

"The first step was to get a restraining order," says Sarah Martinez, Staff Attorney in CRLA’s Salinas office. "So we talked about the process, not directly about the abuse at first. I speak Spanish fluently, so it helped her to relax and get comfortable with me before discussing the ugly details. I constantly reassured her that she was in a safe place, this was confidential, and she shouldn’t be ashamed.”

An estimated 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year. Source: U.S. Department of Justice.

"Many of these women suffer in silence for years, afraid to come forward. Their abusers don’t allow them to work, they threaten them with deportation, being stripped of their kids. So they suffer in silence.”
“Many of these women suffer in silence for years, afraid to come forward,” says Sarah. “Their abusers don’t allow them to work, they threaten them with deportation, being stripped of their kids. So they suffer in silence. When they do come forward, they have many things to report because finally they’ve broken free.”

“I’d want to call the police, but he would grab the phone and tell me again and again that the police would take away my kids. He said I didn’t have a right to my own children because I wasn’t a legal citizen.”

“In Leticia’s case, we got the restraining order and started the VAWA application immediately,” says Sarah. “It requires a laundry list of documents, but with VAWA, at least, the woman doesn’t have to file a police report or recount the abuse in court. You can write down their story and present it as proof.”

Sarah helped Leticia through the year-and-a-half-long process, accompanying Leticia to her formal interview with an immigration officer as a final step. Her client file fills a moving box in Sarah’s office. But it was time well spent. One more family has broken the cycle of violence. “I can work and go wherever I want! Anything is possible now,” says Leticia joyfully. “My kids really appreciate my decision to leave. We were so miserable before. My daughter will never accept or allow herself to be abused, and my son will never be an abuser. We have everything I’ve ever dreamed of because of CRLA.”

“I can’t stress enough the impact that this work has,” says Sarah. “I know there are a lot of [fiscal] cuts coming down the pike, but it’s so valuable to provide legal services for domestic violence survivors. So many women we help have children. This type of work ripples through generations.”

At the end of the interview, Leticia has one more thing to tell Sarah: “I met a woman like me at my apartment complex yesterday who left her husband three days ago. I brought her with me today to talk to you. She’s waiting in the lobby.”

1 pseudonym

2 VAWA – Violence Against Women Act – allows a battered spouse of a lawful permanent resident or U.S. Citizen to apply for U.S. citizenship
It was the injustice of the bills and the danger to their health from the arsenic. Not just for my parents but for the entire community, that made me do something. I couldn’t close my eyes or my heart to the problem.”

Just east of Palm Springs in the Coachella Valley, about six miles from the Greg Norman and PGA West golf courses, lies Sunbird Mobile Home Park in the unincorporated community of Thermal. Unlike Palm Springs, where residents enjoy clean drinking water, leisurely retirement, and second home getaways, most of Sunbird’s 500 residents live in poverty and are forced to pay exorbitant prices for arsenic-contaminated water that’s too dangerous to drink.

Until recently, Lucas Hernandez, a 92-year-old retired farmworker, lived there for 10 years with his 91-year-old wife. Extraordinarily long-lived, especially for a former farmworker, he never thought he’d see the day that his water bill would stretch his and his wife’s social security income to breaking.

Their water bills went from $14 in 2006 to nearly $600 a month at the end of 2008,” says Teresa Valencia, the Hernandez’s daughter who now serves on CRLA’s farmworker leadership committee. “They were forced to move in with my son in Coachella. Whenever I talked to the park manager, she’d just say that ‘this bill is for the water they use.’ It didn’t matter that I washed their clothes at my home and brought them bottled water.

“It was the injustice of the bills and the danger to their health from the arsenic,” adds Teresa, ”not just for my parents but for the entire community, that made me do something. I couldn’t close my eyes or my heart to the problem.”

So she started asking other residents—mostly farmworkers and their families—about their bills. What she found was unbelievable. Some bills were as high as $1,200 a month.

“I went to the city, the water district , the county, and other attorneys,” says Teresa, “and they all told me they couldn’t help. After two full years of being rejected and ignored by everyone else, CRLA came to our rescue.”

“Many water districts, including the nearby Coachella Valley Water District, use tiered rate systems that charge people more per unit when they start using higher amounts,” explains Megan Beaman, Attorney for CRLA’s Coachella office. “Sunbird, which provides water from a privately-owned well, charged rates similar to the water district in the first two levels of its system, but the third and fourth tiers were 10 times higher. So instead of paying $2.00 and $4.00 per unit used, residents...
paid about $20 and $40 per unit. The Hernandez’s extremely high bills were directly linked to this unreasonable billing system. “And it’s not just the cost, it’s the fact they can’t even drink the water because of the arsenic. In the year 2011, it’s just unthinkable that there are thousands of people in California who can’t drink the water in their homes. And they don’t have access to resources to help them get safe drinking water. That’s why CRLA is involved in this effort. It’s a matter of environmental justice.

“It’s been an incredible experience that started with one elderly couple and the belief that there was no law to protect them.”

“It’s been an incredible experience that started with one elderly couple and the belief that there was no law to protect them,” marvels Megan. “CRLA uncovered the ‘secret law’ in the PUC (Public Utilities Commission) code and even had to convince the PUC that the law existed before we could file Mr. Hernandez’s complaint. Residents were later asked to testify before state lawmakers, resulting in an overhaul of the PUC along with mandatory retraining of their employees. Residents’ and CRLA efforts resulted in legislation (AB2515) put in place that should lead to installation of certified filtration systems statewide, not just at this one park. Plus, the PUC ordered a preliminary injunction that gave residents immediate relief from their exorbitant water bills, which may remain in effect until the park is connected to the local water district. I still have a hard time believing how many victories have already resulted from Mr. Hernandez’s complaint.”

“Community action engages and empowers communities,” says Assemblyman Manuel Perez, the author of the legislation. “Their efforts brought us a step closer to providing the safe drinking water that communities throughout California so desperately need and deserve.”

Encouraged by their success, local advocates have joined CRLA in forming a groundwater partners group. And CRLA is also working with environmental justice organizers and a local clinic to increase health professionals’ understanding and awareness of the prevalence of arsenic contamination in the East Valley, not to mention its health effects, which are always at the forefront of community concerns.

“I don’t want to give up or say we’re done,” says Teresa. “Not until this community can live in a dignified way with respect. The work, the effort, the presentations, the speeches, have all been working. It gives me the will to press on. Thank God for CRLA. We have a great attorney in Megan!”
Sarbjit, a young woman from Punjab, India, never dreamed that her marriage to a man from the United States would test her strength and courage. “After we were married, my husband returned to the U.S.,” says Sarbjit. “A little while later, I left my parents’ home in Punjab to come to Roseville, but when I arrived, he was living with a girlfriend. They beat me, and after about a month, they kicked me out of the house.” Sarbjit spent her first month in the U.S. staring at the walls of her room, paralyzed with anxiety when she wasn’t cooking, cleaning, or being beaten by her husband and his girlfriend. She knew no one, had no idea where she was living, and knew no English. She couldn’t even read street signs, so when they kicked her out of the house, she ended up at the gas station down the street. Thankfully, an attendant contacted Casa de Esperanza, a women’s shelter for victims of domestic violence in Yuba City. They gave Sarbjit a place to stay and contacted a private attorney who speaks Punjabi, who then referred her to CRLA – for free legal services. “Sarbjit came to our family law workshop first to get help with filing for divorce in September of 2009,” says Preet Kaur, Staff Attorney for CRLA’s Marysville office. “Then, because I speak Punjabi, we decided to help her file her VAWA1 application. We are the only legal services office in the area that has the expertise to do this.” “Before I came to CRLA,” says Sarbjit, “I felt like no one could help me, but after talking with Preet, I had hope. I felt like I was being taken care of by a family member.” In the fall of 2009, Preet prepared and filed an I-7512 petition for Sarbjit and then went with her to the immigration status interview in Sacramento in June 2010. Sarbjit’s hardship was found to be so credible that the immigration officer approved her application immediately. But her story doesn’t end there. She learned enough English to attend and graduate from a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) program, is now working as a CNA, and she is participating in an Individual Development Account Program through CRLA. As part of the program, every dollar Sarbjit saves will be matched by a two-dollar federal contribution. She can use the money to buy a home, start a small business, or get more education. “First I want to get my high school diploma,” says Sarbjit. “Then an LVN (Licensed Vocational Nurse) certificate.” After that, who knows? It is hard to believe that this young woman, now laughing and talking about her future with so much enthusiasm and confidence, was once afraid to leave her room. With CRLA’s help, Sarbjit is not just a survivor, she’s a victor!  

1 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) – allows a battered spouse of a legal or permanent resident to apply for U.S. citizenship
2 The I-751 is a petition to remove conditions on permanent residence based on marriage.
My father is a physician, and my mother is a nurse,” says Edward Torpoco, an attorney for eBay and ardent CRLA supporter living in San Francisco. “Unfortunately, they, like many others, felt the absence of opportunity in Peru, a country where a restrictive and backwards hierarchy is blind to merit. It presents all sorts of barriers to career development. My father didn’t have upper crust connections that are conducive to success there, so they came to the U.S. and built a very successful medical practice in Los Angeles.

“When I visited Peru in the late 90s, one of the things that struck me was seeing lawyers and accountants, people with degrees, driving taxi cabs because there was so little opportunity for professionals. If I had been born in Peru and my parents hadn’t emigrated, I would have been a lawyer driving a cab. I’m really grateful for my parents leaving everything and moving to the United State to lead a better life.

“This immigrant story that plays out for many of CRLA’s clients, is why I feel such an affinity for CRLA. Individuals with the courage to leave everything and strike out in hopes of building a better life should be admired and applauded.

“But CRLA has also done so much to promote basic human rights, humane working conditions, and health and wellbeing. CRLA took a leadership role—what some viewed as controversial—in challenging the use of pesticides such as DDT. And CRLA is a powerhouse in fighting wage and hour violations. Everyone can appreciate that workers shouldn’t be subjected to harmful or illegal working conditions. This is what I associate with CRLA.

“I also believe very strongly in a lawyer’s ethic and duty to promote fairness and access to the courts. CRLA helps underserved people get that sort of access. And behind that access is CRLA’s staff, its strongest asset, dedicated professionals who give so much time and commitment to CRLA’s mission, often for compensation that pales in comparison to what they could be earning in the private sector—because of their passionate love for the mission.

“It’s incumbent on those of us in the private sector, who have the resources, to passionately support CRLA’s mission—especially in tough times—because CRLA staff give up so much of their day-to-day life in support of this mission.

“But support takes other forms, like helping CRLA obtain grants from corporations or foundations. As an attorney in a corporate environment, I see very few Hispanics represented as in-house counsel or even in the private sector in general. Those of us there can make corporate funders or foundations aware of the tremendous need for CRLA, so they will continue to defend those who need it most, long into the future.”

CRLA would like to thank Edward Torpoco for his many years of support!
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## Statements of Financial Position

**December 31, 2010 and 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASSETS</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2009</th>
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<td>CURRENT ASSETS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cash and cash equivalents</td>
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<td>Grants receivable</td>
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<td>Prepaid expenses, deposits, and employee advances</td>
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<tr>
<td>NON-CURRENT ASSETS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client trust funds</td>
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<td>130,886</td>
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<tr>
<td>Property and equipment</td>
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<td>1,096,988</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total assets</td>
<td>$4,536,259</td>
<td>$5,547,868</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS</th>
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<tr>
<td>CURRENT LIABILITIES</td>
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<td>Accounts payable</td>
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<td>Accrued liabilities</td>
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<td>Client trust funds payable</td>
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<td>Unrestricted</td>
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<td>Unrestricted board designated</td>
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<td>2,015,593</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2009</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total liabilities and net assets</td>
<td>$4,536,259</td>
<td>$5,547,868</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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We value your philanthropic and civic leadership. Thank you again for giving.

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