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Texas Appleseed Receives Grant from Hogg Foundation to Protect Rights of Immigration Detainees with Mental Illness

AUSTIN – [Texas Appleseed](#), a nonprofit public interest law center, was awarded a \$50,000 grant from the [Hogg Foundation for Mental Health](#) to identify, document and address problems and abuses in the immigration courts system in Texas related to treatment of detainees with mental health conditions.

Texas Appleseed is one of six Texas-based organizations that received a total of \$456,565 in grants from the Hogg Foundation in November. The foundation awarded the grants to support timely, meaningful projects that address key issues related to mental health and are likely to improve mental health policies affecting Texas residents.

“The foundation is continuing our longstanding practice of funding projects to address important and relevant mental health issues that directly affect the people of Texas,” said Dr. Octavio N. Martinez Jr., executive director of the foundation. “The grants also will help build interest in and capacity for mental health policy research and development work among nonprofit agencies, academic institutions and government agencies in Texas.”

Nearly half of all immigration detainees in the United States – up to 15,000 people at any given time – are housed in Texas. Texas Appleseed estimates that as many as 15 percent have a serious mental illness, yet many are passed through the court system without any recognition of the barrier that mental health issues pose to meaningful participation in the hearing process.

“People with mental illness in Texas’ immigration detention centers desperately need attention and advocacy. We have heard numerous stories of abuse and neglect, ranging from lack of proper medical diagnosis and medication to inappropriate deportation rulings by immigration judges,” said Rebecca Lightsey, executive director of Texas Appleseed. “The foundation’s grant will enable us to advocate for change in immigration laws, regulations and court practices.”

Detainees with mental illness face enormous challenges to fair legal representation: overmedication or lack of medication prior to court hearings, failure to include or consider medical records during court proceedings, and communications problems stemming from the practice of holding brief preliminary hearings for groups of detainees and providing translators via televideo.

Texas Appleseed plans to conduct interviews and document systemic problems, analyze existing data and research, and publish a study that outlines the problems, describes current laws and rules, and recommends policy changes to address the problems. [Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP](#) will serve as lead pro bono partner on this project.

Lightsey said the work funded by the grant will help better inform judges and others involved in the immigration detention, hearing and deportation process on how to appropriately handle cases of people with mental illness. Appleseed also will promote the adoption of enforceable legal standards similar to those in the criminal justice system to protect the rights of immigration detainees.

“This project will address an often neglected and forgotten group. Mental illness knows no boundaries. As an enlightened society it is imperative that we provide ethical, equitable mental health care services to all in need,” Martinez said.

The Hogg Foundation was founded in 1940 by Miss Ima Hogg, daughter of former Texas Governor James Stephen Hogg, to promote improved mental health for the people of Texas. The foundation’s grants and programs support mental health consumer services, research, policy analysis and public education projects in Texas. The foundation is part of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin.

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