

WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

For Immediate Release

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Committee Settles Discrimination Suit On Behalf of Deaf Individuals at a Virginia Prison

November 17, 2010 – The Washington Lawyers' Committee and Winston & Strawn LLP announce the settlement of a case brought on behalf of a group of deaf and hard of hearing inmates at Powhatan Correctional Center (Powhatan) in State Farm, Virginia. The majority of male deaf and hard of hearing inmates in Virginia are housed at Powhatan. The agreement is significant in that it establishes Powhatan as the first major state correctional facility in the U.S. to have a videophone, which enables the deaf inmates to communicate with their family and friends in their native language. The settlement also provides these individuals with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters two full days a week, as well as sign language interpretation of rules and orientation, disciplinary and release proceedings, medical appointments, and educational and vocational instruction. It also makes Video Remote Interpreting available 24 hours a day for emergency communications, and provides visual notifications about meals and events.

“We applaud the Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC) for its foresight and sincere interest in ensuring equality for deaf inmates. Provision of effective communication is critical to successful rehabilitation of deaf individuals who are incarcerated. Moreover, VDOC has also through this agreement recognized the importance of videophones in enabling deaf inmates to maintain relationships with their families and community,” said Elaine Gardner, the Director of the Disability Rights Project at the Lawyers' Committee.

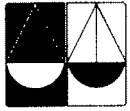
Prior to the settlement, Powhatan only provided an interpreter once a week for six hours to serve all the communication needs of at least fifteen to twenty deaf individuals. Because the interpreter was unable to assist all of the deaf individuals at one time and only visited once a week, deaf individuals were unable to participate in educational programs, communicate with prison staff, and understand medical personnel. The recent settlement, however, significantly improves upon these long-standing conditions and enables these individuals to better realize their rights.

The deaf inmates are particularly pleased that they will now be able to place telephone calls to many of their deaf families and friends who currently use only videophone technology.

“For the first time in years, I am going to be able to say ‘Merry Christmas’ to my deaf family members in Arkansas,” said Larry More, a deaf inmate who recently signed the settlement.

“This is a landmark agreement that should benefit deaf people everywhere,” said David Richardson, a deaf inmate who also signed the settlement.

The deaf and hard of hearing plaintiffs are represented by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the Washington, DC office of Winston & Strawn LLP.



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

Since its founding in 1968, the Washington Lawyers' Committee has handled more than 5,000 cases on behalf of individuals and advocacy organizations in the areas of equal employment, fair housing, public accommodations, public education, asylum and refugee rights, and disability rights.

Winston & Strawn LLP is an international law firm with about 900 attorneys. The firm serves the needs of both the private and public sectors, and is committed to the traditions of client service, professional development, pro bono, and community involvement. The firm's pro bono work includes civil rights, community economic development, federal appeals, political asylum, not-for-profit advice and counsel, and First Amendment/free speech.

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