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**LEGAL AID ORGANIZATIONS FILE LAWSUIT TO CHALLENGE IN-PERSON  
HEARINGS AT LOS ANGELES SUPERIOR COURT CITING  
SPIRALING COVID-19 CRISIS**

*Hundreds of infections and three staff member deaths shed light on troubling conditions in  
largest trial court system in the nation*

**LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA – February 9, 2021** – As Los Angeles reels from over one million COVID-19 infections in the county, attorneys at Public Counsel, Inner City Law Center, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), Bet Tzedek, and Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County are filing a lawsuit to stop the Los Angeles Superior Courts from requiring in-person appearances for non-essential civil matters. In 33 declarations attached to the complaint, Plaintiffs’ staff attorneys describe handling traffic and unlawful detainer matters while crowded into courtrooms that make maintaining current public health guidelines impossible.

“The communities we serve are already suffering the worst consequences of this pandemic, with rates of serious illness and death several times higher than those in whiter, wealthier neighborhoods,” said Trinidad Ocampo, Supervising Attorney for Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County. “The Los Angeles Superior Court, as the guardian of justice, should be trying to mitigate these inequalities, not exacerbate them.”

National public health experts have described the risk of contracting COVID-19 at in-person hearings as unacceptable. Dr. Ranit Mishori, Georgetown University’s Chief Public Health Officer, states that the courts are not presently equipped to implement the necessary protocols and practices to prevent or minimize the spread of the virus, and that the court’s administration of in-person hearings at this time is reckless. Attorneys describe crowded rooms and hallways, unventilated buildings, court staff not consistently wearing masks, and settlement negotiations that require getting closer than six feet to another person.

“This lawsuit highlights how perfunctory rules and docket-clearing measures in the largest municipal court system in the country disproportionately impact the poorest and most vulnerable communities in Los Angeles,” said Indira Cameron-Banks, directing attorney at Inner City Law Center. “When we are being ordered into courtrooms for non-essential traffic and eviction proceedings, we become human shields protecting our clients’ rights and their lives. Despite our best efforts, our clients are often ordered into the courtroom with us. Together, we wait in crowded hallways and courtrooms where social distancing is impossible. The result is that we and our clients are unnecessarily placed at risk of contracting COVID.”

Public Counsel attorney and Equal Justice Works Fellow Lauren Zack has attended over 20 traffic trials and arraignments in person since August 2020. She describes overcrowding, extended periods of waiting in unventilated spaces and the impossibility of maintain six feet of distance from others. “These matters are not time-sensitive and should be postponed. No one should have to risk their life to appear in court for a matter as minor as a cracked windshield,” said Zack.

The open courtrooms at issue in this case largely serve low-income and under-resourced Black and Latinx Angelenos, people facing homelessness in unlawful detainer actions, or people with traffic citations who, if they were better resourced, could opt to avoid their court date by simply paying off the ticket. The consequences for not appearing in court are severe, from fines to driver’s license suspensions to unlawful detainer orders resulting in homelessness.

“Nearly 70% of LAFLA’s clients are Black or Latinx, and all are low-income individuals and families. These are the communities at greatest risk for infection and death from COVID-19. It is inequitable for the courts to require members of these vulnerable communities to appear in court at a time when the dangers of being in close proximity with people from other households are universally recognized,” noted LAFLA Executive Director Silvia Argueta. “As members of the legal services community, we are taking a stand against the injustice of this policy – and calling for greater protection for our clients, court employees, and our staff by postponing in-person court matters until it is safe to gather in large groups.”

While the courts are in the difficult position of balancing their integral role in the functioning of democracy with steep and undeniable health risks, closing the courts is the only safe and fair response to this crisis.

“For the last 11 months, doctors and health experts have asked Californians to make incredible sacrifices: staying away from gatherings of family and friends; cancelling travel plans; skipping holiday traditions, birthday parties, weddings, and even funerals in order to help stop the spread of this virus,” said Diego Cartagena, President and CEO of Bet Tzedek. “The court, on the other hand, is asking our attorneys and our clients, including frail and disabled seniors, to potentially sacrifice their health by spending several hours in packed courthouses and courtrooms full of strangers just to appear for something that can easily be postponed. This flies in the face of public health guidance and puts lives and legal rights at risk.”

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**Public Counsel** is the nation’s largest pro bono law firm. Founded in 1970, Public Counsel strives to achieve three main goals: protect the legal rights of disadvantaged children; represent immigrants who have been the victims of torture, persecution, domestic violence, trafficking, and other crimes; and foster economic justice by providing individuals and institutions in underserved communities with access to quality legal representation. Through a pro bono model that leverages the talents and dedication of thousands of attorney and law student volunteers, along with an in-house staff of more than 75 attorneys and social workers, Public Counsel annually assists more than 30,000 families, children, immigrants, veterans, and nonprofit

organizations and addresses systemic poverty and civil rights issues through impact litigation and policy advocacy. For more information, visit [www.publiccounsel.org](http://www.publiccounsel.org)

**Bet Tzedek** is a legal services organization providing free legal services to low-income individuals living in Los Angeles County regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or immigration status. Its staff of attorney, paralegals, and secretaries assist over 50,000 individuals every year, ranging from abused, abandoned, and neglected immigrant children to seniors, including Holocaust survivors. Over half of Bet Tzedek's clients are Black and Latinx, nearly half live with a disability, and nearly half are aged sixty or older. Among its various areas of practice, Bet Tzedek provides clients with direct representation services to defend against unlawful detainers and traffic citation matters.

**Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLSLA)** is a steadfast advocate for low-income individuals, families and communities throughout Los Angeles. Each year NLSLA provides free assistance to more than 150,000 people through innovative projects that address the most critical needs of people living in poverty. Through a combination of individual representation, high impact litigation and public policy advocacy, NLSLA expands access to housing, health, opportunity, and justice in Los Angeles' low-income neighborhoods. For more information, visit [www.nlsla.org](http://www.nlsla.org).

**Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA)** seeks to achieve equal justice for people living in poverty across Greater Los Angeles. LAFLA changes lives through direct representation, systems change and community empowerment. It has five offices in Los Angeles County, along with four Self-Help Legal Access Centers at area courthouses and three domestic violence clinics to aid survivors.

**Inner City Law Center** is a nonprofit law firm providing legal representation for the most vulnerable individuals and families in Los Angeles who have nowhere else to turn. As the only legal services provider headquartered on Skid Row, Inner City Law Center focuses on combating slum housing, preventing homelessness, and aiding homeless veterans. For more information, please visit [www.InnerCityLaw.org](http://www.InnerCityLaw.org)