NEWS RELEASES

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# Husch Blackwell Honored with NLADA's 2024 Beacon of Justice Award

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National law firm Husch Blackwell was one of 40 law firms to be honored with the 2024 Beacon of Justice Award from the National Legal Aid & Defender Association.

This year's honorees were recognized for their efforts to address issues related to civil and human rights.

Husch Blackwell was recognized for its large-scale pro bono program to assist Afghan refugees facing the one-year deadline to file for affirmative asylum in the U.S. after the fall of the Afghan government in August 2021. Spearheaded by partners Kelli Meilink and Jenna Brofsky, Husch Blackwell partnered with the Jewish Vocational Service of Kansas City (JVS) to assist more than 50 individuals with their affirmative asylum applications.

Between May and October 2022, the firm contributed more than 1,620 pro bono hours valued at more than $500,000 to the Afghanistan Emergency Assistance Project. The project consisted of 49 timekeeping members, including 2 partners, 15 associates, 3 paralegals, 29 summer associates and countless professional staff. For their efforts, Meilink and Brofsky were recognized with Husch Blackwell's 2022 Pro Bono Impact Award.

The firm was also recognized for its efforts in assisting a Missouri prisoner vindicate his constitutional right to be protected from attack by another inmate. While jailed by the Missouri Department of Corrections, Christopher Spates was viciously attacked in his cell by another inmate. At the time, Christopher's hands were cuffed behind his back, preventing him from defending himself. The altercation was no surprise: Christopher and his attacker had fought earlier the same day, but correctional officers disregarded

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that information and put the two in a cell together anyway, with Christopher cuffed and the other man unrestrained.

Christopher initially brought his civil lawsuit pro se in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Missouri; later, the court granted Christopher's request for counsel and appointed then Husch Blackwell attorney Ginger Gooch to represent him pro bono. When Ginger left the firm to become an appellate court judge, Laura Robinson and Brent Dulle took over Christopher's case.

The Husch Blackwell team tried the case to a jury in Springfield, Missouri, arguing that the correctional officers violated Christopher's Eighth Amendment guarantee to be protected from attack by other inmates. The jury agreed, returning a verdict for compensatory damages of $85,000 and punitive damages totaling $140,000 in Christopher's favor. An appeal remains pending at the Eighth Circuit.

The award was presented on June 6 at the 2024 NLADA Exemplar Awards Gala in Washington, DC.

Learn more about these impactful pro bono projects in this video.

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