

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**FAMILY REACHES SETTLEMENT WITH HAWAII PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITY
TO ADDRESS NATIONAL ORIGIN DISCRIMINATION AND
IMPROVE LANGUAGE ACCESS IN PUBLIC HOUSING**

HONOLULU – The Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i (Legal Aid), Valantin Sirom, Sasinta Seremea, and their family announced today that they have reached a Settlement Agreement with the Hawai'i Public Housing Authority (HPHA), resolving a Hawai'i Civil Rights Commission (HCRC) and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) complaint alleging that HPHA discriminated against them and their family because of their ancestry/ national origin and failed to provide them with meaningful language access in its housing programs.

Hawai'i has one of the highest per-capita rates of limited English proficient (LEP) individuals in the U.S. Approximately 24 percent of its residents speak a language other than English at home. Language barriers often prevent members of the immigrant community from obtaining access to the services they need to become self-sufficient.

Mr. Sirom and Mrs. Seremea are LEP individuals and speak Chuukese. In connection with an eviction action, they each signed HPHA's waiver of interpreter form written in English, their minor daughter served as their interpreter at their grievance hearing, and they did not have an interpreter at their eviction hearing. In July of 2015, Legal Aid represented the family in filing a HCRC complaint against HPHA, alleging ancestry/national origin discrimination arising from HPHA's alleged failure to provide the family with interpreters and translate vital documents for the family, including the waiver of interpreter form, lease, and hearing notices.

The parties reached a landmark settlement awarding two thousand dollars in monetary damages to the Sirom family, and an agreement by HPHA to adopt and comply with new language access policies and procedures, provide LEP individuals meaningful notice of their right to free language services, translate vital documents, and train staff on language access and fair housing, in addition to other injunctive relief.

Mrs. Seremea remarked, "We are so thankful for everything Reyna and Legal Aid has done for our family. If it wasn't for them our family would be homeless." Mr. Sirom added, "We are grateful to Legal Aid, HPHA, and HCRC for working together as a team to address discrimination and improve language services in public housing. We hope these new changes will help others like we have been helped, so other families will know their rights and won't have to go through what we did."

"We handle an increasing number of cases on behalf of residents, whose limited ability to read, write, speak, and understand English is a barrier to accessing and retaining public housing or shelter services. Language is power. It's a bridge and life-line for new immigrants working to navigate a new home and empower their families." said Reyna Ramolette Hayashi, Legal Aid Fair Housing Staff Attorney. "We commend Mr. Sirom and Mrs. Seremea for courageously speaking out about their experiences and standing up not just for their rights, but for the rights of all LEP families throughout Hawai'i who will benefit from this settlement. We thank HPHA for its dedicated service to low-income families and for taking proactive measures to ensure equal access to housing for everyone in our community."

HCRC Executive Director William Hoshijo added, "Legal Aid and HPHA should be congratulated for working to ensure the rights of public housing tenants to be free from ancestry-based discrimination. The settlement should serve as a reminder that state and federal fair housing laws prohibit discrimination on

the basis of national origin or ancestry, and that both Legal Aid and HPHA play important roles in protecting against discrimination.” The HCRC enforces Hawai‘i state laws that prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and state services.

“We regularly hear stories from our Micronesian families facing housing discrimination because of their ancestry or because they cannot speak English well. Language, cultural differences, and the unfamiliarity of navigating Hawai‘i’s systems, means our community often can’t access the supports they need to become self-sufficient.” said Josie Howard, Executive Director of We Are Oceania. “We’re thrilled about this settlement because of the impact it will have for all immigrant families in public housing who need language services. We’re proud of our strong sister relationship with Legal Aid, providing intake, outreach, and culturally grounded know your rights workshops at WAO. Legal Aid helps make it possible for us to empower our Micronesian community to navigate success while honoring our diverse indigenous heritage. They truly are angels to the most marginalized in our community. ”

Under the terms of the settlement, HPHA must implement and comply with its newly adopted Language Access Plan and Policy; identify LEP individuals; and provide free and competent language assistance in a timely manner.

HPHA also must provide LEP individuals notice of their right to free language services by: displaying translated posters in HPHA offices; providing a translated language insert with all housing applications and letters to residents affecting their program benefits; and distributing a translated brochure about its free language services to community organizations. HPHA must also translate the “Offer and Acceptance or Waiver of Free Interpreter Services” form and provide oral interpretation of the form upon request.

The settlement further requires that, at hearings involving residents who have waived interpretation services or have chosen to use a family member or friend to interpret, the HPHA hearing body must review the waiver with LEP residents during the hearing to confirm that they understand the waiver. If a resident demonstrates the need for language services, HPHA must reschedule the hearing with an interpreter. The hearing body must also ensure that interpreters are qualified to interpret.

Under the settlement, the Hawai‘i Office of Language Access conducted mandatory language access training for all HPHA Property Managers, Hearings Officers, Eviction Board Officers, and other staff. And HPHA must conduct training on LEP policies annually and at orientation for new employees. The agreement also requires HPHA to conduct fair housing testing to determine whether its staff is consistently implementing its Language Access Plan, and provide progress reports to HCRC.

HPHA owns and operates about 6,196 public housing units with approximately 13,679 tenants and administers approximately 1,816 Housing Choice Vouchers.

- [Click here to read the Settlement Agreement](#) and [Legal Aid’s Fact Sheet](#)
- [Click here to read HPHA’s new Language Access Plan](#)
- [Click here to read Legal Aid’s brochure on Language Access](#)
- [Click here to view HCRC’s Videos on Language Access](#)

In the coming months, Legal Aid will be working closely with community organizations, such as We Are Oceania, to conduct culturally appropriate language access education and know your rights trainings to ensure this landmark settlement is implemented by the communities it aims to benefit.

The mission of the Legal Aid Society of Hawaii’s Fair Housing Enforcement Program is to promote fair housing and end housing discrimination through education, advocacy, outreach, and litigation. Persons who believe they have experienced housing discrimination may contact Legal Aid at (808) 527-FAIR (8024) for assistance. Housing discrimination complaints may also be filed directly with HCRC within 180 days of the date of discrimination, and with HUD within 1 year.

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The mission of the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i is to address critical legal needs through high quality legal advocacy, outreach, and education in the pursuit of justice and fairness.

More information about Legal Aid and its programs is available at www.legalaidhawaii.org and www.fairhousinghawaii.org

Media Contact:

Reyna Ramolete Hayashi
Fair Housing Staff Attorney
(808) 527-8065 (Office)
reyna.ramolete@legalaidhawaii.org

Sergio Alcubilla
Director of External Relations
(808) 527-8063 (Office)
(808) 371-4805 (Cell)
sergio.alcubilla@legalaidhawaii.org