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Pro Bono Report

All for Good

A look at the scope of The Am Law 200's pro bono commitment, as well as some of
its most intriguing and unusual cases

STAMP ACT

Amy Kolz

When a computer glitch erroneously denied food stamps to thousands of low-income New Yorkers with disabilities, it took a five-year legal battle to pressure city and state officials to fix the problem. In September lawyers at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher and the Urban Justice Center (UJC) settled a class action filed on behalf of up to 30,000 people who were stripped of their food stamps when they began receiving federal disability payments.

The action dates back to April 2002, when UJC sued city and state officials in federal district court. The complaint alleged that since at least 1992, people had been automatically cut from food stamp benefit rolls when they qualified for Supplemental Security Income, the federal program for poor people who are too disabled to work. Federal law only requires that the city recalculate these recipients' allotments of food stamps.

City and state welfare officials had long acknowledged the problem but failed to correct it. After years of little progress, UJC mental health project director William Lienhard asked Gibson, Dunn to prepare the matter for trial in May 2006. 'The city hadn't denied liability, but they weren't taking steps to accept responsibility or fix the system in a transparent way,' says Jim Walden, the lead partner for the Gibson, Dunn team. '[City and state officials] had developed the view that they could ignore the problem and it would go away,' he says.

Gibson, Dunn has devoted almost 1,200 hours to the matter since taking it on in May 2006. (Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler had worked on the case, but it withdrew in 2006.) UJC's Lienhard credits Gibson, Dunn's presence with resolving the matter. The city and state 'realized that we had a large, well-resourced firm that was motivated to take it to trial,' he says. The New York attorney general's office estimates that the settlement, which was approved by a federal court judge in September 2007, could provide class members with erroneously withheld food stamps valued at as much as \$70 million.

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