

Landmark Mental Disability Lawsuit Ends After 33 Years

Wyatt Case Created Field of Mental Health Law, Established Rights Nationwide

Washington, DC (December 15, 2003)—The Wyatt case, which first established many of the basic rights of people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities and is widely credited with inspiring the national mental health law movement, came to a dramatic end earlier this month in an Alabama courtroom.

“The Wyatt case created mental health law,” said Ira Burnim, the Bazelon Center’s legal director, who has represented the plaintiffs since 1981. “It forged the tool to end horrible abuses in state institutions and provided the spark for three decades of civil rights advocacy on everything from equal access to public education to fair housing in the community.”

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson ended the case, saying that the state mental health agency has lived up to its obligations under a 2000 settlement to provide necessary services, primarily in the community, and to treat clients with dignity.

The standards set in Wyatt for people with mental disabilities—the right to treatment, the right to services in the least restrictive setting possible and the right to privacy and dignity—are now incorporated in federal regulations and state laws across the country.

“Wyatt is now federal law,” said Judge Thompson, recognizing the case’s enduring national significance.

The case, filed in 1970, was named after Ricky Wyatt. An aunt placed Wyatt in a state hospital when he was 15, hoping he would learn better behavior there. He slept on wet floors in the crowded wards, was heavily medicated to control his behavior and locked in a cell-like room.

Wyatt got out of the hospital in 1973 and is now 49. Appearing for the first time in the case that bears his name, he sat with Alabama Governor Bob Riley and other state officials as the case was dismissed.

In 1971, the late Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. issued an order establishing the right to treatment. A year later, he defined that right in a set of standards for humane conditions and adequate treatment, based on the work of a team of lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Law and Social Policy and their experts in mental health and mental retardation.

The lawyers and experts involved in the Wyatt collaboration went on to form the nonprofit advocacy organization now known as the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. For the last three decades, the group has pursued system-reform litigation on behalf of people with mental disabilities.

Burnim and his successor as lead counsel for the plaintiffs, James Tucker, expressed some concern about ending the court's oversight of Alabama's mental health system, but agreed that the time has come.

"We're optimistic about the state's sustained commitment to the reforms Wyatt initiated," Burnim said. "The state has made tremendous strides—especially in recent years, thanks to Mental Health Commissioner Kathy Sawyer."

Alabama's financial director, Drayton Nabers, noted that despite the state's fiscal crisis, the mental health budget will receive at least level funding through 2005.

Governor Riley assured Judge Thompson at the hearing that the state will assume responsibility for implementing the standards set by the court, "not only financially but in every way."