

For Immediate Release

Former Detainees Challenge Forced Labor Practices

December 3, 2019: Yesterday, three former civil detainees of Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania filed a proposed class action complaint alleging that the County, the private company that owns and operates the Lackawanna County Recycling Center, and other private and public defendants forced hundreds of child support debtors in Lackawanna County to work at the Recycling Center for \$5.00 per day under atrocious conditions. The Plaintiffs are represented by Towards Justice, along with its co-counsel Community Justice Project (“CJP”) and Handley Farah & Anderson (“HFA”).

The Plaintiffs allege that the Defendants extracted their nearly-free labor by requiring them to work in the Center as a condition of eligibility for work release programs, under which they would have been able to earn money to support their children. The alleged conduct, which Plaintiffs allege violates vital protections against slavery and indentured servitude, allowed public agencies and private corporations and their owners to reap profits from the labor of captive and exploited workers.

William Burrell, who originally filed the case *pro se*, said, “They forced me to spend hours each day sorting recyclable items out of a stream of flowing refuse that included soiled diapers, dead animals, and dangerous chemicals.” Burrell also said, “Although I still live with the trauma of working at the Center, I’m glad to continue the fight for justice for myself and others who experienced this nightmare.

Towards Justice is a Denver-based non-profit law firm that supports vulnerable workers in challenging systemic violations like forced labor in the criminal and civil justice systems. Towards Justice Litigation Director Juno Turner said, “It is disheartening that public and private entities would benefit from the work of civil detainees while actively preventing them from earning wages to pay down their debts. If true, this conduct violates the constitution and laws of the United States.”

CJP is a non-profit, unrestricted legal aid program that serves all of Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia and has an office in Scranton. CJP Executive Director Marielle Macher said, “It is shameful to see such obvious violations of Pennsylvania workers’ rights.”

Matthew Handley, an attorney with HFA, stated “It is inexcusable for civil detainees to be forced to work in sub-human conditions for five dollars per day, just to earn the right to work-release so that they can actually begin to pay down the debts that led to their incarceration. This system victimizes not only the detainees, but the individuals to whom they owe debts, all the while unfairly enriching private individuals and corporations.”