

Remarks of Thomas F. Coleman

Press Conference on Filing of DOJ Complaints

June 26, 2015 – Los Angeles, California

My name is Thomas F. Coleman. I am an attorney who has been advocating for equal rights and justice for more than 40 years. I am here today to advocate for Mr. Gregory Demer, an autistic 28-year old man, and for thousands of other individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

As we stand across from the federal courthouse, I am surrounded by self advocates, parent advocates, and professional advocates for disability rights. We are here to make two announcements.

First, today we are initiating a Voting Rights Restoration Project. Second, when we are finished with this press conference, we are walking across the street to file two complaints with the U.S. Department of Justice against the Los Angeles Superior Court.

On the issue of voting rights, we were here at this same spot last July to announce the filing of a voting rights complaint with the Department of Justice against the Superior Court. Last month, the DOJ notified the Chief Justice that it was opening a formal investigation into our allegations.

Earlier this month, we reminded Judge Carolyn Kuhl, presiding judge of the superior court, that thousands of Los Angeles residents needed to have their voting rights restored – rights that were taken from them when judges and court-appointed attorneys used an illegal literacy test to disqualify them from voting.

Gregory Demer is a perfect example of what the court has done on voting rights. Some 10 years ago, despite his mother's affirmation that Gregory was capable of voting, the court disqualified Gregory from voting. Then, in 2012 and again in 2014, court investigators recommended that the court should reinstate Gregory's right to vote. His court-appointed attorneys, and the judges who were assigned to his case at the time, ignored those recommendations. As a result, Gregory was deprived of the right to vote for president, governor, mayor, and county supervisor.

Gregory is one of thousands who deserve to have their voting rights restored. We are pleased that The Arc of California has agreed that its local chapters throughout the state will promote voting rights restoration for conservatees in their areas.

But voting is just the tip of the iceberg. More fundamental rights are being violated by the superior court and its court-appointed attorneys. Conservatees are being denied constitutional rights. Their court-appointed attorneys are routinely violating the Americans with Disabilities Act.

We have filed a class action complaint against the superior court to stop these illegal practices, practices that are adversely affecting thousands of individuals with developmental disabilities.

We are also filing a complaint to protect the constitutional rights of Gregory Demer. The judge in his case – Judge Daniel Murphy – says that Gregory is a parrot whose words mean nothing. We have a message for Judge Murphy: Gregory Demer is a PERSON, not a PARROT. His words do have meaning. He has thoughts and feelings. He makes choices every day. Your treatment of him has been demeaning, dehumanizing, and discriminatory. We trust the DOJ will remedy the injustices that have been perpetrated on him by the court and by his court-appointed attorney. Hopefully soon.