Hello, I’m Stephanie Haffner, a Senior Litigator at Western Center. It gives me great pleasure, on behalf of my colleagues, to present the Advocates’ Award to the UC Irvine School of Law.

As many of you know, public service and hands-on learning are at the core of this flagship law school’s mission. I want to tell you about the school’s involvement in what I am told is the most comprehensive General Relief settlement in any of our memory here at Western Center, the case of *Mankinen v. County of Orange*.

In 2011, Western Center, together with our co-counsel the Public Interest Law Project, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, and Legal Aid Society of Orange County, began investigating Orange County’s General Relief program. Under state law, every county must “relieve and support,” its poorest residents, by providing a small amount of subsistence income to people who have exhausted all other means of support. People eligible to this program, known as General Relief, are frequently homeless and are often persons who have serious disabilities but who do not have a strong connection with the health care system. In 2011 in Orange County, with total population over 3 million, just 400 to 600 people each month received this minimal help.

As you may imagine, documenting the reasons that people who need this aid, cannot get it, is not a simple prospect. Western Center was extremely fortunate to partner with pro bono student volunteers who were hand recruited by Anna Davis, UCI’s Director of Public Interest Programs. The students spent a semester conducting regular outreach to the County’s homeless residents, at places they already came for help.

As a result of the students’ and our co-counsel’s collective efforts, the County agreed to a landmark class action settlement and 3 year consent decree improving nearly every aspect of the County’s General Relief program – getting on aid, keeping it, accommodating persons with disabilities, and even raising the amount of aid. And I want to tell you, the students had substantive impact on the resolution of the case.

But the school’s involvement did not stop there. The Consent Decree gave past applicants and recipients a chance to claim aid wrongly withheld. This time, pro bono student volunteers were joined by students engaged with the school’s Community and Economic Development legal clinic (supervised by Associate Dean Carrie Hempel). This cadre of over 20 students conducted outreach in parks, staffed clinics, helped class members make claims, and even represented them through the claims process.

Thanks to the law school community’s dedication and hard work, thousands of the County’s poorest residents were helped. The school’s community engagement undoubtedly will improve the lives of thousands more in the coming years.

Accepting the Advocates Award on behalf of the law school is its esteemed Dean, Erwin Chemerinsky.