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Dear Friend of the Tennessee Justice Center:

We live by hope. In this trying time for our nation, hope is more important than ever.

Hope has always been central to the Tennessee Justice Center's story. TJC was created nine years ago in response to Congress' attempt to cripple federally funded legal aid for the poor. The need for a non-profit, public interest law firm to fill the void was obvious, but how it would survive or be effective without government funds was not. There was little reason for optimism.

But, as Vaclav Havel has observed, optimism and hope are not the same. Hope is "an orientation of the heart". It is "not a conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." In TJC's case, hope was based on the conviction that the law should respect the dignity and worth of every person, rich or poor. The law powerfully affects people's lives, and especially if they are politically disfranchised. We therefore saw it as critical to make sure that the law protects, rather than oppresses, the weak.

These shared hopes empowered a broad group of community leaders, supporters and staff to create and sustain TJC. Through policy analysis and advocacy, TJC has helped make public institutions more responsive to the needs of the poor. Through landmark class actions, TJC has enforced laws and constitutional guarantees that, without the courts, would exist only on paper.

The story of Connor, a child born with spinal muscular atrophy, illustrates the role that TJC plays in clients' lives. Connor was not expected to live to his second birthday. Connor turned four in June and is full of life, a non-stop talker. He cannot walk, turn over, or eat by mouth, however, and is critically dependent on breathing machines, oxygen monitors, and feeding equipment. A year ago his TennCare HMO refused to pay for this equipment, plunging Connor's parents and doctors into months of frantic, fruitless phone calls and letter-writing. When the medical supply company finally threatened to sue the parents and remove the equipment, his distraught mother learned about TJC. TJC warned state officials that the HMO was violating two of the federal class action orders we had won, TennCare ordered the HMO to cover the equipment, and Connor's care was safe.

As we were in Connor's case, TJC is effective for several reasons. For all of its imperfections, our legal system is the one forum available to the poor in which truth and the justice of their cause matter more than political influence or financial clout. The integrity of TJC's advocacy is grounded in relationships with low-income families and familiarity with the harsh realities of their lives. In conveying those realities to often unwilling listeners, TJC strives to "speak truth to power" -- as diplomatically as possible, as forcefully as necessary. (This role of messenger bearing unwelcome news has made TJC an equal opportunity lightning rod for politicians of both parties.) At the same time, TJC has matched principle with pragmatism, quietly offering public officials real world solutions to difficult policy dilemmas. These ingredients have enabled TJC to touch millions of lives over the years. TJC has:

- Enforced legal guarantees of adequate medical care for over half a million children
- Won a landmark ruling enabling Medicare beneficiaries to enforce federal care standards.

- Made “welfare reform” more humane by establishing policies that maintained support for tens of thousands of the state’s poorest children, prevented their homelessness or unnecessary placement in the foster care system, and afforded special protections to victims of domestic violence.
- Helped strengthen oversight of the nursing home industry.
- Enabled 1.3 million TennCare patients to appeal when an HMO wrongfully denies them care.

During 2004, TJC advocacy continued to make a difference for families living on the margin. Thousands of Tennesseans regained TennCare coverage that had been wrongfully terminated. By prompting the state to correct outdated administrative policies, TJC achieved a \$30 million annual increase in the amount of food stamp assistance provided to low-income households across Tennessee. TJC won reform of welfare practices that had penalized children whose parents paid child support.

TJC dispenses hope not just on a “wholesale” basis through affecting policy, but one family at a time, by directly aiding the individual clients whose cases guide our policy advocacy. The quality assurance surveys we send to clients when we close their cases come back full of gratitude for advocates they describe as “God sent”, “angels” or “real friends”. Occasionally, someone thanks TJC for saving their life, or the life of a loved one. More often, they thank their advocate for simply giving them hope.

It is heartbreaking to realize how little that takes, and how desperately it is needed. As advocates for Tennessee’s poorest and most vulnerable families, we serve people who fall through the cracks in our political and economic systems. They seldom receive the sort of respect and affirmation that those of us who are privileged take for granted. Their everyday struggles remind them constantly that they -- or, even more painfully, their children -- don’t matter. That is why they are so grateful when they reach TJC and (to borrow a common phrase from the client surveys) can talk “*at last*, to someone who will listen and care”. If you are starved for respect, if you feel utterly invisible, just being heard, much less cared for, is a powerful stimulus to hope. One of the most poignant recent survey responses was from a recent refugee who apologized for his poor English. He said that his life experiences had brought him to despair, and he quoted the Latin proverb *homo homini lupus* (“man is wolf to man”). The compassionate concern he encountered at TJC had restored hope, he said, in the human race.

The struggle continues. The state has recently hired five national law firms to try to overturn the court orders that protect Connor and 1.3 million other Tennesseans. The state has repudiated settlements negotiated only a year ago. The plan is to cut medical care for thousands of TennCare’s sickest patients. TJC has outlined cost-saving alternatives (for example, reducing HMO payments to bring them in line with national rates, and using proven computer technology to identify over-prescribing of costly drugs). Officials are pressing ahead, however, with service cuts that will endanger lives and ultimately drive up medical costs. We continue to push alternatives that can prevent a confrontation and protect the poor. The prospects for Connor and the other families we serve are literally terrifying.

And so, we fall back on our hopes, hopes that are inspired by the courage of our clients and steadfastness of our colleagues, and that are sustained by the generosity of TJC’s supporters. Thank you so much for providing hope to the families we serve.

Sincerely yours,

Gordon Bonnyman