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TIPS

City Limits WEEKLY
Week of: March 13, 2006
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Topics- 
TIPS

MENTALLY DISABLED ON HOLD

Lawsuit demands better access to low-cost phone service. >
K. Angelova

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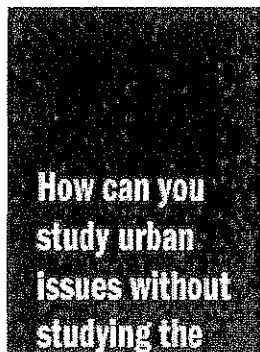
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A new lawsuit charges that Verizon Communications discriminates against the mentally disabled in adult homes by failing to provide them with access to a federally funded low-cost phone service. LifeLine was established by the Federal Communications Commission to allow eligible customers to pay one dollar per month and nine cents per local phone call. But Jean Phillips, an attorney at MFY Legal Services, Inc., which filed the suit on March 3, said Verizon created an "onerous" application process that discourages clients from signing up, and has led to their further isolation. The Coalition of Institutionalized Aged and Disabled (CIAD), the case plaintiff, is a nonprofit organization for residents' rights working with 30 of the approximately 50 adult homes that operate in New York City. "To make a call these people have to use a payphone in the building or go outside," said CIAD Executive Director Geoff Lieberman. "They have no privacy to discuss their problems." MFY estimates that two-thirds of the 7,000 adult home residents in New York City are mental health consumers. Verizon requires LifeLine applicants to first install standard phone service at regular rates, and to submit a social security number and an identification card, said Lieberman. But many mentally disabled residents, especially those who have been in institutions for years, do not have government-issued documents, he said. Residents who manage to obtain standard service often incur high bills while their applications are pending. As a result, many feel pressured to cut off phone service before receiving assistance. Verizon Communications declined to comment on the charges. (K. Angelova) [03/13/06]

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