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For Immediate Release
March 3, 2006

VERIZON SUED FOR FAILURE TO PROVIDE TELEPHONE SERVICE TO DISABLED PEOPLE

Advocacy Group Charges Discrimination against the Mentally Disabled

New York, NY—MFY Legal Services, Inc. (MFY) filed suit in federal court on March 3 against Verizon Communications, charging that the communication giant’s refusal to provide accessible phone service to the city’s adult home residents discriminates against the psychiatrically disabled. The suit, Coalition of Institutionalized Aged & Disabled (CIAD) v. Verizon, asserts that the company’s failure to offer Lifeline phone service violates federal and city laws designed to protect mentally disabled people from discrimination and to compel service providers to make reasonable accommodations to enable disabled people to access their services.

Lifeline is a federally-funded program of discounted phone service for low-income people. Verizon is required by law to publicize the benefit, which allows disabled people to pay \$1 per month and nine cents per local call for private service. CIAD, an advocacy organization for adult home residents, says Verizon has flouted the law by neither publicizing the program nor modifying its complex application process, which most residents find impossible to navigate on their own.

The suit, filed on the birthday of Alexander Graham Bell, demands that Verizon actively publicize Lifeline to the city’s 7,000 adult home residents, two-thirds of whom are mental health consumers, and change its application and billing procedures to accommodate these customers’ disability. If successful, the suit could set a precedent that would improve the daily lives of over 30,000 adult home residents statewide.

“Adult home residents are extremely isolated and their situation gets worse without a phone,” said Jean Philips, MFY’s lead attorney on the case. “To stay healthy, residents need regular contact with family and friends. Without a phone, they become more and more dependent on the home,” she added.

“Our society builds ramps for people in wheelchairs, the media provides closed captioning for the deaf, and manufacturers design all sorts of equipment for people with physical disabilities,” said Erik Grafe, MFY’s co-counsel on the case. “Yet there are few accommodations made for people with mental disabilities. This suit will help change that,” he said.

MFY Legal Services, Inc., one of the first non-profit legal services agencies in the country, has represented low-income and disabled New Yorkers since 1963. MFY’s Adult Home Advocacy Project defends the rights of mentally disabled adult home residents throughout the city.