

**SNELL & WILMER APPELLATE PARTNER M.C. SUNGAILA CONTRIBUTES TO  
LANDMARK HUMAN RIGHTS VICTORY BEFORE INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL**

**ORANGE COUNTY (August 19, 2011)** – In a landmark decision, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) found the United States government responsible for human rights violations against Jessica Lenahan, a Colorado woman, and her three deceased children who were victims of domestic violence. This is the first case brought by a domestic violence survivor against the U.S. before an international human rights body. The IACHR ruling also sets forth comprehensive recommendations for changes to U.S. law and policy pertaining to domestic violence.

Snell & Wilmer partner M.C. Sungaila, on behalf of the World Organization for Human Rights USA (Human Rights USA), Legal Momentum, Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles (WLALA) and other groups filed two amicus briefs in support of Lenahan in the case.

The case began in Castle Rock, Colorado in 1999 when local police failed to respond to Jessica Lenahan's repeated calls for help after her estranged husband, Simon Gonzales, kidnapped their three young children in violation of a domestic violence restraining order. Ten hours after Lenahan's first call to the police, her husband drove up to the Castle Rock Police Department and began firing his gun at the police station. The police returned fire, killing Gonzales. Inside the truck, the police found the bodies of the three girls who had been shot dead. Local authorities failed to conduct a proper investigation into the children's deaths, resulting in questions about the cause, time and place of their deaths that remain to this day.

The commission's decision stands in contrast to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Town of Castle Rock v. Jessica Gonzales* (2005), where the justices ruled that Lenahan (then Gonzales) had no constitutional right to police protection, and that the failure of the police to enforce Lenahan's order of protection was not unconstitutional. Lenahan then filed a petition against the U.S. before the IACHR, alleging violations of international human rights.

In a statement to the Denver Post on August 17, 2011, Lenahan said, "I have waited 12 years for justice, knowing in my heart that police inaction led to the tragic and untimely deaths of my three young daughters. Today's decision tells the world that the government violated my human rights by failing to protect me and my children from domestic violence."

"I applaud the IACHR for recognizing Jessica Lenahan's right to justice," said Elizabeth Grayer, the President of Legal Momentum. "Ms. Lenahan suffered an unimaginable tragedy. The challenge now is to honor the lives of Ms. Lenahan's three little girls by urging the U.S. government to implement the many recommendations made by the Commission."

Sungaila has worked closely with Human Rights USA for the past four years and Legal Momentum for 14 years. "I am proud to have had the opportunity to contribute to this important decision and to partner with Human Rights USA and Legal Momentum in their commitment to protect human rights of men and women of all ages, both domestically and internationally," said Sungaila.

For 13 years, Human Rights USA has sought an end to torture, security for their clients from gender-based persecution and accountability for abuses of power through fast and creative impact litigation. In case after case, they have achieved that goal. Human Rights USA is committed to bringing justice to the survivors of human rights abuses, working to bring the U.S. laws in line with universal human rights standards. For more information about Human Rights USA, go to [www.humanrightsusa.org](http://www.humanrightsusa.org).

Founded in 1970, Legal Momentum is the nation's oldest legal defense and education fund dedicated to advancing the rights of all women and girls. For more than 40 years, Legal Momentum has made historical contributions through litigation and public policy advocacy to advance economic and personal security for women. For more information about Legal Momentum, go to [www.legalmomentum.org](http://www.legalmomentum.org).

Established in 1919, WLALA has been a powerful and respected advocate of women attorneys, women in general, persons of color, the disadvantaged, and the under-represented in Southern California.

**About Snell & Wilmer L.L.P.**

Founded in 1938, Snell & Wilmer is a full-service business law firm with more than 400 attorneys practicing in nine locations throughout the western United States and in Mexico, including Los Angeles and Orange County, California; Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona; Denver, Colorado; Las Vegas and Reno, Nevada; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Los Cabos, Mexico. The firm represents clients ranging from large, publicly traded corporations to small businesses, individuals and entrepreneurs. For more information, visit [www.swlaw.com](http://www.swlaw.com).

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