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American Studies

The Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund



Behind-the-scenes records and case files of a major Latino civil rights organization

The Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF), headquartered in New York City, is the major civil rights advocacy organization for the Puerto Rican community of the United States. PRLDEF was incorporated in February 1972, taking its place among institutions such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense Fund (NAACP LDF) and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF).

Using litigation as its primary strategy for addressing issues of inequality, PRLDEF has argued landmark cases that have had profound implications for Latinos throughout the United States, but particularly in the northeast. PRLDEF does not operate regional offices outside of New York, but it has brought lawsuits in Chicago, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New Jersey. In addition to initiating class action suits, PRLDEF participates in cases as an outside interested party and has joined MALDEF and other litigants through amicus curiae (friend of the court) briefs in certain major cases.

Part 1: Executive and Administrative Records

The three main series in the first installment of PRLDEF records are the annual reports, legal division files, and the records of the board of directors. The annual reports provide brief summaries of the major cases tried by the organization.

The reports show that the organization focused its energies on cases pertaining to bilingual education, employment discrimination, housing discrimination, voting rights, access to public assistance programs, and discrimination in the criminal justice system. Three of the most high profile cases in the collection are *ASPIRA of New York v. Board of Education of the City of New York* (bilingual education); *Guardians Association v. Civil Service Commission* (employment discrimination); and *Huertas v. East River Housing Corp* (housing discrimination). The Legal Division files in this part include additional reports on these cases and background material. The board of directors series contains minutes of meetings from 1971–1985 and correspondence, allowing researchers an inside look at the functioning of PRLDEF.



Page from 1982 PRLDEF annual report. Children participating in the bilingual program at P.S. 155 in Harlem. Below the picture is a summary of major developments in *Aspira v. Board of Education*.

Part 2: Legal Division Case Files, Section A: Law Enforcement and Police Brutality

Enforcement and Police Brutality

This section reproduces fifteen case files. The cases cover police brutality, searches and seizures, language use and ability, employment discrimination, jury selection, and the rights of homosexuals. Twelve of the cases come from New York City; one from Suffolk County, New York; one from Springfield, Massachusetts; and one from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The files include correspondence, amicus curiae briefs, transcripts of court proceedings, depositions, affidavits, and other court documents. The cases date from 1970 to 1992.

The five cases on police brutality are from New York City. The cases are: *Castillo v. Day*, *Cortes v. Conigliaro*, *Carmona v. NYPD*, *Coleman v. Klein*, and *Rodriguez and Rivera v. Port Authority*.

Three cases relate to searches and seizures: *Perez v. Ward*, *People v. Alba*, and *Torres v. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico*. In *Perez v. Ward*, a New York City Police officer challenged his dismissal from the force. In *People v. Alba*, Vicente Alba was arrested for illegal weapons possession after he carried a gun into the Bronx Criminal Court. PRLDEF submitted an amicus curiae brief along with several other groups, including the National Conference of Black Lawyers and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Of the remaining seven cases, two involve language use and ability (*Hernandez v. New York* and *Springfield Housing Department v. Olivo and Colon*), and the others cover employment discrimination (*Gonzalez v. Lansky*, *Gonzalez v. Board of Examiners of the City of New York*, and *Gonzalez v. Board of Education of the City of New York*), discrimination in jury selection (*Cruz v. United States*), and the rights of homosexuals (*Under 21 v. City of New York*).

Part 2: Legal Division Case Files, Section B: Unemployment and Welfare

This edition consists of fourteen case files covering the administration of public welfare programs, including the provision of unemployment insurance. Latino ethnicity or limited English language ability are issues in all fourteen cases. The cases date from 1970 to 1988.

Three cases deal directly with recipients of public assistance. These cases are *Mendoza v. Blum*, *Sanchez v. Norton*, and *Torres v. Matthews*. In *Mendoza v. Blum*, the plaintiffs claimed that New York City's failure to provide them with services in Spanish

violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Social Security Act. *Sanchez v. Norton* involved a complaint against the Connecticut Welfare Department. Spanish-speakers often faced long delays when arriving for appointments, could not get assistance over the phone, and could not understand written communications they received in English. *Torres v. Matthews* involved a person whose Supplemental Security Income benefits were terminated after he moved to Puerto Rico.

Two other cases relate to public welfare programs but focus on other issues. Employment discrimination is the main controversy in *Muniz v. New York City Department of Social Services*. In *El Camino de la Esperanza v. Erie County*, El Camino de la Esperanza filed suit in an attempt to win Comprehensive Employment and Training Act program funding from Erie County.

The other major group of cases concern unemployment insurance. The two largest cases are *Barcia v. Sitkin* and *Pabon v. Levine*.

Overall, the records of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund offer law school students, post-World War II U.S. history students, and Latino studies researchers an inside look at the activities and case files of a Latino civil rights organization.

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Source Note: The PRLDEF collection is held by the Archives Division, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York, New York City. Images courtesy of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños.

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