
Working Pro-Bono: Gray Reed Represents Houston Man with \$9,000 Water Bill

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Gray Reed litigation Associate, Carter Stern, picked up a case pro-bono for a man in south Houston who received a monthly water bill asking him to pay \$9,000.

Jose Valera, whose bill usually averages about \$25, says he didn't notice a leak, but he did see some water bubbling on a pipe. Within a day of noticing the bubbling, Valera contacted a plumber who fixed the pipe after the resident notified the city. The \$9,000 bill –for 719,000 gallons, came a few days later. It totaled \$9,087.98 for one month.

"The facts of this case are outrageous and the City has no mechanism and little incentive to help him out," Stern said. "He needs somebody who can advocate for him and fix this. Otherwise, an already indigent man, a veteran, will be left without any water. That is incredibly unfair and I wanted to help do something about it."

The city turned off the water on Feb. 3, and a plumber fixed the pipe, leaving just four weeks for all that leaking to have happened. It is a one-inch water pipe that runs to Valera's house and in order for the city's number to be true the pipe would have to be completely severed and running at more than 18 gallons per minute.

"The city is attempting to hold Mr. Valera responsible for an outrageous bill without offering any justification other than their readings," Stern said. "There is affirmative evidence from Mr. Valera and the plumber who fixed the pipe that this huge amount of water wasn't discharged on Mr. Valera's property. The City has acknowledged that this is an unusual case but claim they are constrained by the municipal code to only offer the minimal relief they have thus far. The City doesn't want to back down because they are worried that if they do, every citizen with a minor water billing issue will think they can get over on them and will drag them into litigation. I understand this concern, but they are effectively threatening to cut off Mr. Valera's water unless he can pay for all this water and then claiming they are not required to make any affirmative showing that he actually used the water. They have all the leverage in this case because they are "constrained" by the self-serving rules that they themselves wrote to protect themselves. Consumers like Mr. Valera are offered only minimal protection under the municipal code."

Media Coverage Includes:

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KHOU-TV Houston

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