



# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Judge Firmat Receives 2008 Aranda Access to Justice Award**

San Francisco—Judge Francisco F. Firmat of the Superior Court of Orange County has been selected as the recipient of the 2008 Benjamin Aranda III Access to Justice Award.

Chief Justice Ronald M. George will present the award to Judge Firmat on Tuesday, October 14 at the Summit of Judicial Leaders in Monterey.

The California Commission on Access to Justice cosponsors the Aranda Award with the Judicial Council, State Bar, and California Judges Association. The award is named for the founding chair of the Judicial Council's Access and Fairness Advisory Committee, and it honors a trial judge or an appellate justice whose activities demonstrate a long-term commitment to improving access to justice.

“Judge Firmat is a humanitarian who, in daily thought and action, reflects on the needs of the parties and what the court can do to help them get through the system,” said Presiding Judge Nancy Wieben Stock of the Superior Court of Orange County.

“Judge Firmat is a kind and compassionate individual who is truly concerned with the disenfranchised members of our community,” said Alan Slater, Court Executive Officer of the Superior Court of Orange County. “He has demonstrated his commitment to improving their understanding and accessibility to the judicial system through the introduction of numerous unique and creative programs. Judge Firmat is a worthy candidate and deserving of the Benjamin Aranda III Access to Justice Award.”

Judge Firmat was born in Cuba and immigrated to the United States at the age of 12. After earning his law degree in 1976 from Western State

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University School of Law, he began a solo practice, which he pursued from 1976 to 1985, when he was appointed to North Orange County Municipal Court.

In 1990 he was elevated to the superior court, where he presided over complex civil litigation. He developed a reputation for successfully bringing parties together in settlement through the use of techniques that allowed people to resolve their disputes with dignity. He decided to make a midcareer turn in 2001 and took an assignment in the Family Law Department, where his influence was immediate. As a trial judge, he instituted procedures allowing Spanish-speaking self-represented parties to conduct informal, voluntary settlement conferences in their first language. This process was so successful that many parents returned voluntarily to his courtroom to introduce him to their children.

Since 2004 he has served as the supervising judge of the superior court's family law panel. This panel of 17 judicial officers presides over domestic violence, elder abuse, family, paternity, and child support cases. Judge Firmat has cultivated a spirit among judges and staff that calls for them to serve the public as if their own family members were involved in the case.

Judge Firmat "has a keen understanding of the emotional toll that family law matters have on the family unit and society as a whole," said attorney Daniel James Boehm of Santa Ana. "He has no agenda other than to try to touch the lives of all of the litigants that pass through his courtrooms, represented or unrepresented, and to treat all in an equal and fair manner, with dignity and respect."

"Thanks to Judge Firmat's leadership, service on the family law bench has become a desirable appointment for many of Orange County's bench officers, which in turn helps to ensure that those seeking access to justice are better able to obtain it," said Kenneth W. Babcock, Executive Director and General Counsel of the Public Law Center in Santa Ana.

Judge Firmat has been the recipient of numerous awards, including Judge of the Year from the Hispanic Bar Association in 1994, the Business Section of the Orange County Bar Association in 1996, Consumer Attorneys of Orange County in 1996, the Family Law Section of the Orange County Bar Association in 2005, and Orange County Women Lawyers in 2007. He also received Statewide Judge of the Year from Consumer Attorneys of California in 2001 "in recognition of his untiring efforts and enlightened approach toward the improvement of the administration of justice."

Past recipients of the Aranda Award are Justice Judith D. McConnell (1999), Court of Appeal, Fourth Appellate District, Division One; Judge Veronica McBeth (2000), Superior Court of Los Angeles County; Judge Charles W. Campbell, Jr. (2001), Superior Court of Ventura County; Judge Donna J. Hitchens (2002), Superior Court of San Francisco County; Judge Ken M. Kawaichi (2003), Superior Court of Alameda County; Justice Earl Johnson,

Jr. (2004), Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, Division Seven; Judge Aviva K. Bobb (2005), Superior Court of Los Angeles County; Judge Donna M. Petre (2006), Superior Court of Yolo County; and Justice Kathleen O’Leary, Court of Appeal, Fourth Appellate District, Division Three (2007).

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