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Jefferson Award Winning Attorney Champions Underdogs, Changes Policy

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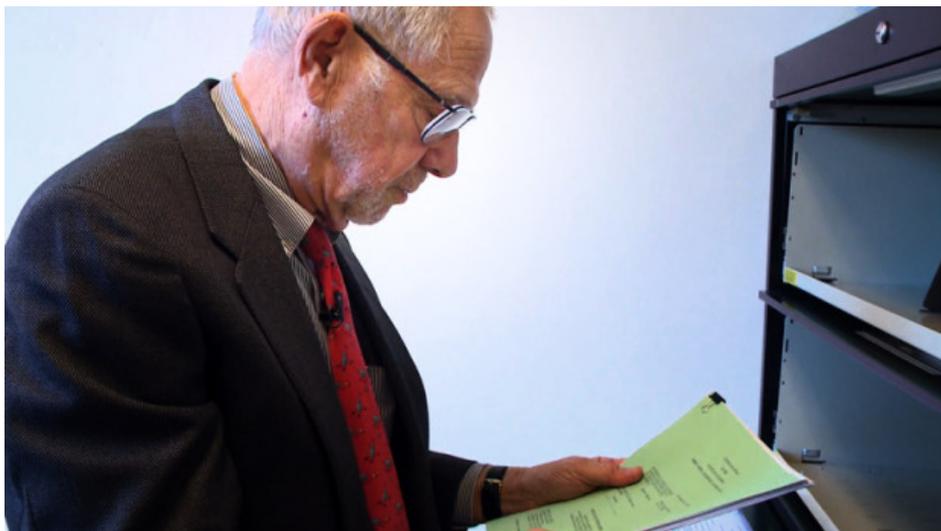
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Jefferson Award winner Mort Cohen (CBS)

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SAN FRANCISCO (KPIX 5) – A Bay Area attorney has been building a legacy in the courtroom and the classroom. His volunteer work has earned him this week’s Jefferson Award.

For more than three decades, Mort Cohen has tried to inspire his students at Golden Gate University School of Law.

“That love for the law as a nonviolent way of solving our problems is something I hope to communicate,” he explained.

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But while his students know him as full time law professor, in the community, he has made a name for himself as a tireless advocate for the underdog.

"I've represented what I considered to be invisible, powerless people for a long period of time," Cohen said.

He takes one or two new cases a year, pro bono, often standing up for the rights of seniors and nursing [home](#) residents.

Nursing home reform advocate Patricia McGinnis says before Cohen's landmark legal victories in the 1980s, [mental health](#) and nursing home patients had no laws protecting them from being given mind-altering drugs.

"We were able to craft regulations that require informed consent before anybody in a nursing home can be drugged up with psychotropic drugs," McGinnis remembered.

And Cohen won a Marin County case in state appellate court last year that affirmed similar rights for mental health patients.

"You could not treat such individuals involuntarily without counsel, without notice, without a hearing," he said. "So all those things changed. They changed not only in Marin, but throughout the state."

In his lawsuits on behalf of jail inmates, the 78-year-old attorney battled against overcrowding, understaffing and unsafe conditions. His work led to the construction of four new jails.

"He's the ultimate civil rights attorney," McGinnis added. "Those are lasting legacies. And not too many people want to take those cases because, you know what? They're not paying cases."

"Being a bridge between society and that invisible, powerless group of folks is just... it makes you feel like your life is useful," Cohen said.

So for decades of work on behalf of the elderly, inmates and mental health patients, this week's Jefferson Award in the Bay Area goes to Mort Cohen.

Note: Currently, Cohen is challenging a California law that allows doctors to determine when a patient is mentally able to refuse treatment. He's suing to have a legal hearing first. He says the patient or their surrogate should have the final say on refusing treatment.

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