



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE  
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

### **For Immediate Release**

#### INITIATIVE TO STOP DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES GAINS MOMENTUM WITH THE FILING OF NEW LAWSUIT

WASHINGTON, D.C., September 15, 2005-- A lawsuit against nationally known residential apartment developer Bozzuto and Associates was announced today, alleging discrimination against persons with disabilities. The complaint, filed in Maryland federal court by the Equal Rights Center and the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, charges Bozzuto with continuous and systematic violations of the civil rights of persons with disabilities in the design and construction of more than 50 apartment complexes in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania.

Bozzuto, headquartered in Greenbelt, Maryland, is one of the largest apartment developers in the eastern United States. The apartment complexes involved in the District include: The Ellington, The Lexington at Market Square, the Residences at Historic Row, and the Fedora at Meridian Hill. Also included are 14 complexes in Virginia located in Ashburn, Centreville, Reston, Manassas, Vienna and Woodbridge; and 31 complexes in Maryland including: The Bennington in Silver Spring, The Whitney at Bethesda Theater in Bethesda, and Centerpoint in Baltimore.

"Since 1991 the law has required developers to include basic features of accessibility," said Isabelle M. Thabault, Director of the Fair Housing Project at the Washington Lawyers' Committee. "Fourteen years later, companies like Bozzuto continue to build apartment complexes that are difficult or impossible for persons who use wheel chairs to access. Through the use of narrow doorways, steps, and insufficient floor space, they have effectively barred from their apartments persons who use wheel chairs."

The federal Fair Housing Act requires all covered multi-family dwellings, built for first occupancy after March 13, 1991, to be designed and constructed in a manner that incorporates certain features of both accessibility and adaptable design including usable doors, kitchens and bathrooms, reinforced walls for grab bars and accessible and usable public and common use areas.

"Many players in the rental housing industry seem to believe that they can, with impunity, shut their apartment doors to people with disabilities," said Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center. "This attitude is wrong legally and morally. This is an extremely serious civil rights issue. Disability rights are civil rights. It is uncivil to ignore them."

In December 2004, the Equal Rights Center began an initiative to eradicate this form of housing discrimination with the filing of a lawsuit against Archstone-Smith Trust, one of

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the nation's largest apartment developers. As a result, Archstone-Smith is retro-fitting over 12,000 apartment units in 71 complexes across the country to make them more accessible to persons with disabilities.

"The Equal Rights Center is determined to do all we can to help erase this damaging and demeaning form of discrimination," continued Rabbi Kahn. "Today, we take the next step by asking the courts to require Bozzuto and Associates to comply with the law and make their properties accessible to everyone. In 2005, in these United States of America, how could we settle for anything less?"

The Equal Rights Center, a long-standing advocate of civil rights issues, brings this lawsuit as part of its efforts to eliminate disability-based discrimination in the rental housing industry. In this suit, the Equal Rights Center is represented by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the Washington law firm of Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson, LLP.

Originally established in 1983 as the Fair Housing Council of Greater Washington, the Equal Rights Center is a private, not-for-profit, civil rights agency that is now a product of mergers with both the Fair Employment Council in 1999 and the Disability Rights Council of Greater Washington on June 30, 2005. It is dedicated to identifying, challenging, and eliminating discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and government services through education, research, testing, counseling, enforcement, and advocacy. To obtain more information about the Equal Rights Center, please go to [www.equalrightscenter.org](http://www.equalrightscenter.org) or call the Equal Rights Center at (202) 234-3062.

The Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs was established in 1968 to provide pro bono legal services to address issues of discrimination and entrenched poverty. Since its founding, the Committee has handled more than 5,000 cases on behalf of individuals and advocacy organizations in the areas of equal employment, fair housing, public accommodations, public education, asylum and refugee rights, and disability rights. For more information about the Committee, see [www.washlaw.org](http://www.washlaw.org). The Committee can be reached at (202) 319-1000.

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