



**WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE  
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS**

## **COMPLAINTS FILED AGAINST CITY OF MANASSAS FOR ILLEGAL DISCLOSURES OF CONFIDENTIAL SCHOOL RECORDS**

WASHINGTON, D.C., November 2, 2006—The Equal Rights Center, a non-profit civil rights organization, announced that four families are filing today complaints with the United States Department of Education alleging that the City of Manassas, Va. illegally released their children's confidential school records to zoning inspectors in an ongoing campaign against Hispanic residents.

Just months after the ERC and several Hispanic families filed federal discrimination complaints against Manassas with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) challenging the City's prohibition of extended families from living together, Manassas, Va. is once again the subject of federal complaints, this time alleging the Manassas City Public Schools (MCPS) has illegally released confidential school records, in violation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) as part of a covert effort to investigate suspicions of residential overcrowding

Represented by Beveridge & Diamond, P.C. and the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, six Manassas residents allege that the MCPS repeatedly disclosed information from students' education records, without parental consent, to identify potential overcrowding violations of the City's zoning ordinance. Information was taken from the Commonwealth of Virginia's Triennial Census to identify students from different families living at the same address in areas zoned for single family housing.

It is alleged that this Census information collected from students' parents was used to file overcrowding complaints on an overcrowding hotline. Parents were unaware that MCPS was secretly filing overcrowding complaints against them using their children's confidential school records. This behavior amounts to repeat unauthorized disclosures in violation of FERPA.

FERPA prohibits educational agencies and institutions receiving federal funds from maintaining a policy and practice of releasing education records, or personally identifiable information contained within those records, without first obtaining parental consent.

"Manassas residents trust their government leaders to protect them, obey the law and be truthful. And parents want information about their children kept confidential as the law requires. It is clear that their trust has been woefully misplaced. It has been repeatedly and repugnantly violated. Now, the mayor and his cohorts are shamelessly trying to convince their constituents that the real culprits are the very victims of the official wrongdoing. The citizens of Manassas have every right to be outraged over such behavior" stated Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, ERC Executive Director.

On December 5, 2005, the City of Manassas adopted a zoning provision that narrowed the definition of "family" to make it a crime for extended relatives to live together in a single family home, regardless of the size of the dwelling. The ordinance amendment effectively banned relatives such as aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and cousins from sharing a home. In official statements, City representatives contended that the ordinance was aimed at combating overcrowding and related problems but it was focused solely on the relationship of the residents in the home and not on the number of occupants or size of the dwelling. Contrary to the City's representations, Manassas's zoning scheme was not a mechanism for addressing "overcrowding;" it was simply the most egregious in a string of City policies dating to at least 2003 that were designed to restrict housing opportunities for Manassas' growing Latino population. Although the Manassas City Council suspended enforcement of the zoning amendment on January 11, 2006 due to public uproar, the complaints filed

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with HUD alleged that the City has continued its pattern of selective and discriminatory actions targeting Hispanic families.

In May, the ERC and several Manassas residents filed a complaint with HUD alleging that the City of Manassas engaged in selective enforcement of zoning and related laws, illegal harassment, intimidation and coercion, as well as discriminatory attempts to evict Hispanic residents and families based on national origin and familial status. This matter is currently being investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice.

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 the product of mergers with the Fair Employment Council in 1999 and the Disability Rights Council of Greater Washington in 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. For 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, please see [www.washlaw.org](http://www.washlaw.org). The Committee can be reached at 202-319-1000.

Beveridge & Diamond, P.C. is a national law firm founded in 1974 and based in Washington, D.C. It focuses on environmental, land use and litigation matters, and has a deep commitment to pro bono efforts and community affairs. For more information about Beveridge & Diamond, please see [www.bdlaw.com](http://www.bdlaw.com).

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