



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

For Immediate Release

**EQUAL RIGHTS CENTER FILES LARGEST NATIONAL LAWSUIT IN
INITIATIVE TO STOP DISCRIMINATION AGAINST
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

WASHINGTON, D.C., April 27, 2006—The Equal Rights Center, represented by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the law firm of Gilbert Heintz & Randolph LLP, announced today the filing of the fourth, and largest, in a series of lawsuits against nationally-known residential apartment developers. This most recent lawsuit, filed in federal district court in Maryland, against developer Equity Residential, alleges continuous and systematic civil rights violations against persons with disabilities in the design and construction of at least 300 apartment complexes in 21 states and the District of Columbia. These complexes include more than 80,000 individual apartment and residential units.

Equity Residential, a publicly-traded real estate investment trust that is incorporated in Maryland, is headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. Equity Residential has been recognized as the third largest owner of multifamily housing units in the United States, claiming to own over 200,000 apartment units.

"It is estimated that there are over 47 million people in the United States with disabilities. Housing is a fundamental need and right for everyone, including this huge segment of our population. No provider of housing, and certainly not one of the largest in the country should be allowed to bar people with disabilities from its apartments by building them so that they are inaccessible," said Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, the Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center.

This new action is the fourth lawsuit brought against major developers as part of the Equal Rights Center's efforts to eliminate disability-based discrimination in the housing industry. Actions have previously been filed by the Equal Rights Center against Archstone Smith Trust, AvalonBay Communities, and Bozzuto & Associates. "At the Equal Rights Center we are committed to doing everything we can to convince the housing industry that it should, and must, treat all people fairly under the law," concluded Rabbi Kahn.

"Since 1991 the law has required developers to include basic features of accessibility in multi-family housing," said Isabelle M. Thabault, Director of the Fair Housing Project at the Washington Lawyers Committee. "Years later, major developers like Equity Residential are still building apartment complexes that are difficult to access by persons who use wheel chairs. As one of the largest providers of rental housing in the United States, Equity Residential should be a leader in stopping this type of discrimination. Instead, it has added thousands of dwelling units to the housing market that are off-limits to persons who use wheelchairs."

The federal Fair Housing Act requires multi-family dwellings with four or more units, built for first occupancy after March 13, 1991, to be designed and constructed in a manner that incorporates certain features of accessibility and adaptable design including usable doors, kitchens and bathrooms, reinforced walls for grab bars and accessible and usable public and common use areas. The requirements apply to all units in elevator-served buildings, and the first floor of buildings without elevators. Some of the specific requirements include, for example, that doors be sufficiently wide, and kitchens and bathrooms have enough turning space, to allow use by a person using a wheelchair.



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“These accessibility requirements add comparatively little to the cost of a building if they are included, as required by law, at the time of construction; however, they can be very expensive to fix if not done right the first time.” said Ms. Thabault.

The Equal Rights Center is represented in this lawsuit by the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the Washington law firm of Gilbert Heintz & Randolph LLP.

“As will be shown during the course of the litigation, the discriminatory allegations in the complaint are readily verifiable and beyond dispute,” said Stacy Schaefer, an attorney with Gilbert Heintz & Randolph LLP. “The fair housing claims in this lawsuit should not come as a surprise to a major developer like Equity Residential, since the federal requirements have been in place for over a decade and half. Unfortunately, Equity Residential buildings reveal a pattern and practice of accessibility violations at scores of apartment properties across the country. We hope that Equity Residential will be willing to sit down with us and take all appropriate action to remedy the situation. While we are committed to discussions, we are equally committed to ensuring that the law is followed.”

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 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 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. The Committee can be reached at 202.319-1000.

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