



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

For Immediate Release

**CIVIL RIGHTS LAWSUIT FILED AGAINST THE CITY OF MANASSAS, VA AND ITS
SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR DISCRIMINATING AGAINST HISPANIC RESIDENTS**

WASHINGTON, D.C., October 16, 2007 — The Equal Rights Center and eight Hispanic individuals filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia today against the City of Manassas, Virginia and the Manassas City Public Schools (MCPS), alleging that the City and its school system have engaged in a systematic effort to target, discriminate against, and evict the City's Hispanic residents.

According to the complaint, the City has violated the U.S. Constitution, the Federal Fair Housing Act, and federal and state civil rights laws by selectively enforcing zoning and related laws to target Hispanic residents and by engaging in illegal harassment, intimidation, and coercion based on national origin and familial status. The complaint further alleges that MCPS also violated the U.S. Constitution, the Federal Fair Housing Act, and federal and state civil rights laws by secretly disclosing confidential student records to the City to target Hispanic families for discriminatory zoning actions. The Equal Rights Center and the eight Manassas residents are represented by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the law firm Beveridge & Diamond, P.C.

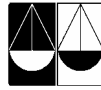
In June 2004, the City of Manassas implemented a Residential Overcrowding Code Enforcement Program that was purportedly aimed at "overcrowding," but that actually was intended to reduce the Hispanic population in Manassas. The complaint alleges that from at least June 2004 through the present the City, relying on anonymous complaints from a City-run phone and e-mail hotline, has engaged in a pattern of selective enforcement that targets Hispanics. The complaint alleges that from the beginning of 2005 approximately 92% percent of all homes investigated by City inspectors were Hispanic-owned or occupied. Approximately 15 percent of the City population is Hispanic.

What is more, the complaint alleges that the City's own records show that City inspectors used intimidating tactics only when inspecting Hispanic homes, including having police officers present and conducting nighttime inspections. None of these actions were taken against non-Hispanic residents. The individual plaintiffs in the case, all of whom are U.S. citizens or have valid immigration status in the United States, and many of whom own their own homes, were among the victims of these discriminatory inspections.

Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, the Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center stated, "I am shocked, appalled and embarrassed by the violations of the law promulgated by those very individuals whom citizens turn to for protection of their civil rights. Shame on the Manassas officials who have committed such wrongs! Now they seek to attack those of us seeking to protect the rights of the innocent victims. Shame! These officials should come clean and face their offenses squarely and honorably."

-more-

Manassas 1.../3



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

After more than a year of implementing its zoning enforcement program, few overcrowding violations were actually found by City inspectors. However, the City Council decided to intensify enforcement efforts by amending its zoning ordinance to be more restrictive. In December 2005, the City changed the definition of “family” in the City Code in a way that essentially prohibited extended families from living together regardless of the size of the house. Although the amendment was brought under the pretense of combating overcrowding, it focused on the relationship of occupants in a household, not the number of occupants. The new “family” definition was simply another piece of legislation designed to target Manassas’ growing Hispanic population. As the Defendants knew, Hispanic families are more likely to live with extended family members, and would be disproportionately impacted by the amendment.

This amended definition of “family” was essentially the same as one that the City Council had abandoned in 1991 as unconstitutional due to a 1977 Supreme Court ruling that struck down a similar ordinance. Although the zoning amendment was suspended in 2006 due to widespread criticism, at least 23 homes, all occupied by Hispanic families, were inspected while it was in effect.

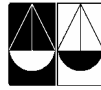
Isabelle M. Thabault, Director of the Fair Housing Project at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee, said “We recognize municipalities have a legitimate interest in enforcing laws regulating health and safety in housing, but the evidence in this case shows the City of Manassas was not motivated by health and safety concerns but by an intent to harass its Hispanic residents. Unfortunately, city officials in Manassas seem to have forgotten that our country has always been a land of immigrants. Manassas city officials, who should be the guardians of the law, have instead used the law as a sword to target and harass newcomers. When Manassas changed the definition of “family” to exclude extended families from living together, it essentially made a common Hispanic family structure illegal in Manassas. The complaint filed today is the beginning of a process to stop Manassas’ discriminatory actions.”

The complaint also alleges that the Manassas City Public Schools and the City of Manassas School Board violated federal and state laws by disclosing to City inspectors confidential information on at least 52 students from student records without required parental consent. City inspectors used confidential school records to target Hispanic families for harassment and inspections during the school year. In disclosing confidential school records, MCPS violated federal and state laws that protect the privacy rights of students and their families.

Laura E. Varela, Director of the Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project at the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs stated, “It is particularly disturbing that Manassas City officials were so desperate to rid their City of Hispanic individuals and families, that they knowingly disregarded not only Supreme Court precedent, but other federal laws that prohibit discrimination and protect the privacy rights of students.”

-more-

Manassas 2.../3



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

The Equal Rights Center is a private, not-for-profit, civil rights agency 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 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 fair housing, equal employment, 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.

Beveridge & Diamond, P.C. is a national law firm founded in 1974. It has a deep commitment to pro bono efforts and community affairs. For more information about Beveridge & Diamond, please see www.bdlaw.com.

For more information contact:

Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, 301.580.4547
Executive Director, Equal Rights Center
bkahn@equalrightscenter.org

Isabelle M. Thabault, 202.319.1000 ext.106
Director, Fair Housing Project
Washington Lawyers Committee for
Civil Rights and Urban Affairs
isabelle_thabault@washlaw.org

Gus Bauman, 202.789.6013
Attorney, Beveridge & Diamond, P.C.
gbauman@bdlaw.com

Max Williamson, 202.789.6084
Attorney, Beveridge & Diamond, P.C.
dwilliamson@bdlaw.com

Para más información en español:

Michael Caesar, 202.370.3203
Gerente, Derechos de Inmigrantes
Equal Rights Center
mcaesar@equalrightscenter.org

Laura Varela, 202.319.1000 ext. 125
Director, Proyecto de Inmigrante y Refugio
Washington Lawyers Committee for
Civil Rights and Urban Affairs
laura_varela@washlaw.org

#

Manassas 3.../3