



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

**For Immediate Release**

**ALLEGATIONS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

WASHINGTON, D.C., October 11, 2007 – The District of Columbia government routinely discriminates against its citizens who are deaf and hard of hearing by failing to provide for adequate communication with D.C. government agencies, according to a class action lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court today.

The lawsuit, filed by two D.C. residents who are deaf and the Equal Rights Center, a non-profit civil rights organization, claims that the District government regularly violates the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the federal Rehabilitation Act, and the D.C. Human Rights Act by failing to provide reasonable accommodations, such as qualified sign language interpreters and teletypewriters (“TTY’s”), to assure adequate communication with members of the public who are deaf or hard of hearing. As a result, residents who are deaf and hard of hearing are routinely denied access to D.C. government services, benefits, activities, and programs. The plaintiffs are represented by the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the law firm Steptoe & Johnson LLP.

According to the complaint, one plaintiff sought Medicaid benefits, low-income benefits, and a reduced prescription medication cost plan from the D.C. Income Maintenance Administration (IMA), which operates on behalf of the District to determine eligibility for local and Federal benefit programs. When the plaintiff asked for a qualified sign language interpreter to be provided, she was informed that IMA did not provide such services, despite the fact that the law guarantees individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing the right to an interpreter when necessary for effective communication.

This plaintiff has repeatedly requested a qualified sign language interpreter since 1997, but has never received one. She has also been unable to communicate with IMA via telephone since the agency does not have a teletypewriter and has ignored her attempts to communicate with the agency using a telephone relay service designed for individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. As a result of IMA’s failure to provide this plaintiff with the proper accommodations or to accept phone calls from a telephone relay service, she has been unable to receive her full eligible Medicaid reductions and benefits.

The second plaintiff sought approval from the D.C. Board of Zoning Adjustment to build a garage on his property. After a hearing for his request was set, he contacted the D.C. Office of Zoning to ask for a qualified sign language interpreter and was assured that one would be present during the hearing. However, on the day of the hearing, the proceedings began before the interpreter arrived, and even when the interpreter finally arrived, she was not a qualified or professional interpreter. Her only prior experience was interpreting religious services, and she lacked the signing ability and legal vocabulary to interpret large portions of the hearing. As a result of the D.C. Office of Zoning’s failure to provide a qualified sign language interpreter, the plaintiff was unable to understand or participate in his hearing and was prevented from making an informed decision about the status of his case.

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“By failing to provide a qualified sign language interpreter, telecommunication devices, or other methods of communications with people who are deaf and hard of hearing, the District denied and continues to deny these individuals the same access to government services solely on the basis of their disabilities,” stated Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, the Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center. He continued, “Let’s be clear about this. Discrimination against people with disabilities runs rampant through our society. When government entities engage in this discrimination it is especially egregious and disheartening.”

According to statistics released by Gallaudet University in July 2004, there are over 25,000 individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing living in the District alone, as well as more than 215,000 individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing living in Maryland and over 287,000 individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing living in Virginia. According to the complaint, many of these individuals are unable to communicate with D.C. government agencies, making the plaintiffs’ claims representative of the Class.

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.

Steptoe & Johnson LLP has over 60 years of practice and more than 450 attorneys in offices in Washington, New York, Chicago, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Century City, London, and Brussels, providing counsel and representation in a wide range of legal fields. The firm also has a long and rich tradition of public service, handling a full spectrum of pro bono matters. Steptoe attorneys recorded over 36,000 pro bono hours in 2006, and was ranked as one of the Top 20 Pro Bono Law Firms by the American Lawyer.

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