



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE  
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

**For Immediate Release**

### **D.C. GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS NOT ACCESSIBLE TO ALL**

WASHINGTON, DC, January 31, 2007—District of Columbia government buildings, including the John A. Wilson Building, are not properly accessible to people with disabilities, according to a complaint being filed today in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. The plaintiffs are the Equal Rights Center, a major civil rights organization, and Robert Coward, president of a local advocacy organization for persons with disabilities. They are represented by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP. The complaint alleges that the District has denied persons with disabilities access to and use of its buildings, in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the DC Human Rights Act.

In their Complaint, the plaintiffs contend that emergency evacuation routes and procedures in DC government buildings disregard the needs of people with disabilities. For example, during an emergency evacuation of the DC building at 825 North Capital Street, NE, plaintiff Robert Coward was stranded on the fourth floor in a room where he was attending a meeting. When the elevators were deactivated due to the alarm, Mr. Coward, who uses a wheelchair, had no means to exit the building, and District employees at the building were untrained and unable to direct him to safety.

"The lack of accessible accommodation and the failure to provide a safe environment for persons with disabilities has been a legacy of the District of Columbia. We are fighting to ensure the safety, civil rights and full inclusion of individuals with disabilities into mainstream DC society," says Robert Coward.

The Complaint also alleges barriers at the seat of the District government, the Wilson Building, which houses the offices and chambers of the Council of the District of Columbia and the Mayor. The accessible entrance to the Wilson Building is kept locked. In order to enter through the accessible entrance, one must ring a doorbell and wait outside until the accessible door is unlocked by an employee. Mr. Coward and others with disabilities who need to testify at the Wilson Building have at times been forced to wait for long periods of time in inclement weather for a staff person to respond to the bell and unlock the door. People with disabilities have also been unable to navigate the halls of the Wilson Building independently due to the overly heavy interior doors.

The ERC has made several attempts since August, 2006 to work with the District to have these issues remedied. However, neither the ERC nor its attorneys have received a response and the accessible entrance at the Wilson Building remains locked during business hours.

"It is disheartening and worse when the city government in the nation's capital will not exercise the vision, dedication and competence necessary to make its city hall a place that provides easy access and egress to people with mobility disabilities", asserts Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, the Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center. "Again and again we made the city aware of the problems at the Wilson Building and were told the problems would be corrected promptly. These were empty words."

An ERC survey of the Wilson Building confirmed violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act Standards for Accessible Design at building entrances, including:

- a designated accessible entrance that is kept locked;
- a pervasive lack of signage indicating accessible exits;

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- parked cars blocking the sidewalk to the non-designated, alternate accessible entrance; and
- an interior lift at the alternate accessible entrance that is not independently usable by persons with disabilities.

"It is offensive that people with disabilities must ask permission and wait to enter the seat of the District government, while others freely enter, and it is unconscionable that the lives of people with disabilities are put at risk during emergency evacuations of these government buildings," states plaintiffs' attorney Elaine Gardner of the Washington Lawyers' Committee.

Originally established in 1983 as the Fair Housing Council of Greater Washington, the Equal Rights Center is a private, not-for-profit, civil rights, membership 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.

Founded in 1946 by lawyers committed to legal excellence, internationalism and diversity, Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP is a leading international law firm with approximately 850 lawyers around the world. The American Lawyer has rated the firm among the top five New York-based firms for pro bono commitment. Cleary Gottlieb has offices in New York, Washington, D.C., Paris, Brussels, London, Moscow, Frankfurt, Cologne, Rome, Milan, Hong Kong and Beijing.

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