



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE  
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

# Manassas School Board Joins City to Settle Civil Rights Lawsuit with Equal Rights Center

## **For Immediate Release**

WASHINGTON, D.C., September 24, 2008 – Last night the Manassas School Board approved a settlement with the Equal Rights Center (ERC), a Washington, D.C. based civil rights organization, and 11 residents of Manassas, to resolve a federal civil rights lawsuit filed against the City of Manassas and the Manassas City Public School system. The lawsuit alleged that Manassas discriminated against the City's Latino residents and that the school system illegally disclosed confidential student school records to the City. The Settlement will be submitted to the federal court in Alexandria for approval.

The lawsuit stemmed from the City's passage of an Ordinance in 2005 that limited the right of extended family members to live together. The Ordinance was rescinded after widespread criticism by the ERC and other organizations, but the lawsuit alleged that the City continued to target enforcement of zoning laws against Latino residents.

"The complaint alleged that the City of Manassas targeted and selectively enforced municipal housing code provisions against Latino residents through a series of actions, including the use of an anonymous tip hotline that led to baseless and warrantless home inspections, and that the Manassas School System had improperly released student information to aid the City in its inspection efforts," said Isabelle Thabault, an attorney at the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs (WLC), representing the plaintiffs.

"We applaud the City and School Board's efforts to put these allegations behind them and hope this settlement will send a strong message to other municipalities that civil rights laws protect residents against selective and discriminatory governmental actions," Thabault said.

In approving the settlement, the Manassas School Board has agreed to protocols that will protect against inappropriate disclosures of student information in the future, and has also agreed to increase efforts to address diversity issues in the schools. School employees will also attend training to address issues raised in the lawsuit.

The Manassas City Council previously approved the settlement at its meeting on Monday night, agreeing to expansive new protections for residents related to the City's residential inspections, and to discontinuing its practice of conducting inspections based on anonymous complaints or other unreliable information. The agreement also calls for Manassas to hire a City Housing Manager and Advocate who will implement and oversee many of the safeguards in the new procedures, provide an avenue of redress for residents who believe they have been treated unfairly by the City, and serve as a resource for housing-related information for all City residents. Also as part of the settlement, certain City employees will be required to attend fair housing training, and the City will conduct outreach to the Latino community.

As part of the settlement, the City and the School Board have also agreed to make a payment of \$775,000 to resolve all the plaintiffs' claims of damages, attorneys' fees and administrative costs relating to the lawsuit.

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The parties will now submit the agreed-to settlement to the U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va., and request that the Court approve it. The ERC and the individual residents were represented in the lawsuit by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs and by the law firm of Beveridge & Diamond, P.C.

“We are very pleased that the Mayor and City Council Members of Manassas, as well as the Manassas Schools Superintendent and School Board members, have made clear their determination to safeguard the civil rights of all the residents in their community,” said Donald L. Kahl, Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center. “The ERC will be working closely with the Latino community of Manassas, and with City and School officials to monitor the important protections established through this settlement.”

Originally established in 1983, the ERC is celebrating 25 years of protecting civil rights. The ERC is dedicated to identifying, challenging, and eliminating discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and access to government services through education, research, testing, counseling, enforcement and advocacy.

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.

Beveridge & Diamond, P.C. is a national law firm founded in 1974. The firm 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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