



For Immediate Release

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Equal Rights Center Recent Agreement with Ellman Properties Adds to Growing Initiative to Protect Housing Choice Voucher Holders in Montgomery County *More Than 6,500 Apartments Made Available to Voucher Holders in County*

WASHINGTON, D.C., December 14, 2009 — The Equal Rights Center (ERC), a national non-profit civil rights organization, and Reco Rivers have reached an agreement with Ellman Properties resolving complaints that Housing Choice (Section 8) voucher holders had been turned away at Ellman's Montgomery County, MD properties. As a result of this agreement, 13 Ellman properties will now be available to families using Housing Choice vouchers. This agreement is another victory for the ERC's fair housing initiative, aimed to identify and eliminate discrimination against Housing Choice voucher holders in the greater D.C. metropolitan area. To date the initiative has made more than 15,000 apartments units available.

Rivers contacted the ERC after seeking an apartment at Ellman properties and being told that they would not accept his housing voucher on two separate occasions in November 2008 and May 2009. A subsequent ERC investigation and testing confirmed that Ellman routinely turned down housing choice vouchers. The ERC and Rivers contacted Martin Ellman and Susanne McCoy of Ellman Properties requesting an agreement to open their units to individuals with housing vouchers and Ellman immediately began working with the ERC to address the issue.

"Housing choice vouchers have an affect on far more than the living location for a family. The vouchers often open doors to healthier lives, safer streets, and give families the peace of mind we all deserve," said Don Kahl, Equal Rights Center Executive Director.

As part of the agreement Ellman has confirmed that it will not discriminate on the basis of source of income. Ellman has also agreed to implement or strengthen non-discrimination policies at all its apartment properties, provide fair housing training to employees, and to display signs and advertisements letting potential renters know that they accept housing choice vouchers and other forms of rental assistance. Ellman is also compensating Mr. Rivers and the ERC for their damages and legal costs.

"The Equal Rights Center is very pleased that our investigation and testing was able to help not only Mr. Rivers, but all voucher holders in Montgomery County," said Chip Underwood, who coordinated the ERC's testing efforts.

In 1991, Montgomery County added "source of income" as a protected class under its Human Rights Act. This prohibits landlords from refusing to rent to, or imposing differing conditions on, a prospective tenant just because they wanted to use some form of federal, state or local rent subsidy.

During 2008, the ERC conducted telephone and in-person tests at 99 Montgomery County rental properties to determine if landlords were refusing to accept vouchers as payment for rent. In October 2008, the ERC released its investigative report, *A Step Away From Homelessness*, documenting a significant rate of discrimination by Montgomery County landlords against Housing Choice Voucher Holders.

The entire report is available here,
<http://www.equalrightscenter.org/rights/AStepAwayFromHomelessness.php>.

When notified of the ERC's concerns relating to the treatment of Voucher Holders at their properties, several Montgomery County landlords began working proactively with the ERC to ensure that their apartments accept Housing Choice Vouchers in Montgomery County. Landlords working affirmatively with the ERC on this issue include: **AvalonBay Communities, Dreyfuss Management Services, Inc., Home Properties, Inc., and Post Properties**. These landlords collectively own or manage more than a dozen apartment properties with more than 6,500 apartment units in Montgomery County.

Both Mr. Rivers and the Equal Rights Center were represented in this matter by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs and the Washington law firm of Hogan & Hartson LLP.

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About the Equal Rights Center (www.equalrightscenter.org)

Since 1983, the Equal Rights Center (ERC), a national non-profit civil rights organization, has worked to identify, challenge, and eliminate discrimination. The ERC combats discrimination in housing, employment, access to public accommodations and government services, disability rights and immigrant rights, through education and outreach, research, testing, counseling, advocacy and enforcement.

About the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs (<http://www.washlaw.org/>)

The Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and 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. The Committee can be reached at 202.319.1000.