



For Immediate Release

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Equal Rights Center Initiative to Protect Housing Choice Voucher Holders in Montgomery County, MD Opens More Than 6,500 Apartments to Voucher Holders

WASHINGTON, D.C., September 8, 2009 — The Equal Rights Center (ERC), a national civil rights organization, announced today initial results of its fair housing initiative identifying and combating discrimination against Housing Choice (Section 8) Voucher Holders in Montgomery County, MD.

In 1991, Montgomery County added “source of income” as a protected class under its Human Rights Act and prohibited landlords from refusing to rent 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 both phone 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 ERC’s investigation and testing has led to nine actions before the Montgomery County Office of Human Rights and the courts to protect Voucher Holders’ rights.

“Often times a voucher is all that stands between a family and homelessness. Too many families are finding the doors to private housing closed to them because of discriminatory practices by landlords all across the country,” said Don Kahl, Executive Director of the ERC. “We are extremely pleased that these Montgomery County landlords recognize the importance of the Housing Choice Voucher Program, and the human toll that refusing Voucher Holders as tenants has on families.”

When notified of the ERC’s concerns relating to the treatment of Voucher Holders at their properties, several Montgomery County landlords, although denying wrongdoing, immediately began to work 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.

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In reaching agreements with the ERC, each of these four landlords have agreed not to discriminate on the basis of source of income, have agreed to implement or strengthen non-discrimination policies at all their Montgomery County apartment properties, and have agreed to display signs letting potential renters know that they accept housing choice vouchers and other forms of rental assistance. These landlords have also agreed to monetary settlements with the ERC that collectively total more than \$190,000.

“Eliminating discrimination against families who use housing choice vouchers is a key factor to ensuring that parents and their children can live in safe and affordable housing and have equal access to schools and jobs,” said Mary Hahn, the Fair Housing Project Director at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs.

“Failure to respect the antidiscrimination source of income protections provided by Montgomery County seriously undermines the ongoing efforts to promote integrated housing. We are delighted that these landlords have joined the ERC in ensuring equal opportunities for all, regardless of source of income,” Hahn said.

The Equal Rights Center was represented in reaching these settlements by the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs, and the Washington law firms of Covington & Burling LLP, Foley & Lardner LLP, King & Spalding LLP, and Morrison & Foerster LLP.

For more about the Equal Rights Center, please visit www.equalrightscenter.org.

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