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Equal Rights Center Resolves Housing Discrimination Case: 450 Housing Units to be Made Available to District's Housing Choice Voucher Holders

WASHINGTON, D.C., July 14, 2009 — The Equal Rights Center (ERC), a national civil rights organization, and Sarah Bourbeau have reached an agreement with D.C. landlord, Jonathan Woodner Co. to resolve a long-standing federal civil rights lawsuit. As a result of the settlement, 450 additional apartments in the District of Columbia will now be available to families using Housing Choice (Section 8) vouchers.

“Housing Choice vouchers ensure that many low-income families can live in safe and secure housing,” said ERC Executive Director Donald L. Kahl. “It is absolutely essential that families in the District who qualify for housing vouchers be allowed to use them wherever they choose, free from discrimination.”

Discrimination against a person when they seek housing using a Housing Choice voucher (or other government subsidy) is prohibited in the District of Columbia by the D.C. Human Rights Act.

The ERC first became aware of Woodner's actions in 2005. In conducting its own investigation and testing, the ERC found The Woodner to have an express policy to illegally refuse apartments to housing choice voucher holders.

The ERC was also contacted by Sarah Bourbeau, a voucher holder, who had inquired about housing at The Woodner apartments. When Bourbeau advised that she wished to pay part of her rent by using a Housing Choice voucher, The Woodner refused, stating that they did not accept vouchers and turned Bourbeau away.

Based on this evidence, a federal lawsuit in the District of Columbia was filed. During the three years of litigation, the court issued the first written opinion in the District of Columbia upholding protection against “source of income” discrimination in the face of a variety of challenges by the landlord.

As a result of its agreement with the ERC, The Woodner has committed itself to a variety of non-discrimination practices. Woodner employees will complete fair housing training, and The Woodner will display signs in rental offices and managed properties both English and Spanish that state their acceptance of housing choice vouchers.

“This settlement opens an additional 450 apartment units up to being rented in the District by voucher holders like Bourbeau,” said Kahl. “More choices in housing means that voucher families will have more opportunities to improve their lives.”

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The ERC and Bourbeau were represented by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Affairs & Urban Affairs and the law firm of K&L Gates LLP.

“The need to reinforce the District’s prohibition against source of income discrimination is particularly acute during this economic crisis, in which many families are struggling to afford safe and quality housing,” said Mary Hahn, Fair Housing Project Director for the Washington Lawyers’ Committee.

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