



For Immediate Release

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Equal Rights Center Reaches Agreement with the District of Columbia to Make the Wilson Building and District Emergency Evacuation Procedures More Accessible

ERC lauds the District for taking steps to ensure equal access to all citizens

WASHINGTON, D.C., January 28, 2010 – The Equal Rights Center (ERC), a national non-profit civil rights organization, Robert Coward, president of an advocacy organization for persons with disabilities, and the District of Columbia announced today their agreement and initiative to make the Wilson Building more accessible to people with disabilities, and to revise District emergency evacuation procedures to include procedures for the evacuation of people with disabilities.

“The ERC applauds the District of Columbia for agreeing to take the necessary steps to make its seat of government accessible, and for taking steps to ensure the safety of individuals with disabilities in District buildings,” said Don Kahl, Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center. “The District has made another stride to ensure all its residents and visitors are treated without discrimination. We hope more cities across the nation recognize the importance of making their facilities accessible for all.”

In 2006, after receiving complaints, the ERC surveyed the Wilson Building and found many accessibility issues that were contrary to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the federal law which requires places of public accommodation to be accessible to people with disabilities.

The agreement between the ERC and the District centers on the accessibility of the Wilson Building, which houses the offices and chambers of the Council of the District of Columbia and the Mayor. The historic building was renovated in 2001 to include accessible entrances, but the designated accessible entrance on Pennsylvania Avenue was kept locked, requiring people with disabilities to navigate two city blocks to a rear entrance, or wait for an employee to unlock the door. In addition, the entrance to the Council Chamber itself was inaccessible to many people with disabilities, impeding their ability to attend or testify at Council hearings. There were also accessibility issues at the accessible entrance on D Street.

Under this agreement, the District has agreed to ensure that the accessible, Pennsylvania Avenue Street Level entrance is kept unlocked during business hours, to provide accessibility signage, and to maintain automatic door openers. The District will also make the Fifth Floor Council Chamber accessible through the installation of self-operable automatic door openers. The District also agreed to make the interior wheelchair lift at the D street entrance of the building more accessible by ensuring the lift is unlocked and independently accessible.

“A just government serves its citizens. By making the District’s city hall more accessible, the District is sending out the message that it values all of its citizens equally,” said Elaine Gardner, Disability Rights Project Director at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. “This is a great victory for not only people with disabilities, but all those who value democracy.”

The District has also agreed to adopt emergency evacuation procedures that provide for the evacuation of individuals with disabilities. Plaintiff Robert Coward had been left stranded in a District government building during an emergency evacuation. 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 an area of refuge.

“I am thankful the District has agreed to take the necessary steps to ensure their emergency evacuation procedures equally protect the safety of all individuals,” said Robert Coward.

Both Mr. Coward and the Equal Rights Center were represented in this matter by the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs and the law firm of Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton 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.

About Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP (<http://www.cgsh.com/splash.aspx>)

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.

