



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS & URBAN AFFAIRS

For Immediate Release

**EQUAL RIGHTS CENTER FILES FEDERAL DISCRIMINATION COMPLAINT
AGAINST THE CITY OF MANASSAS, VIRGINIA. TEN MANASSAS
RESIDENTS ALSO FILE RELATED COMPLAINTS.**

WASHINGTON, D.C., May 25, 2006—The Equal Rights Center (ERC), represented by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the law firm of Beveridge & Diamond, P.C. announced today the filing of a federal discrimination complaint with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development against the City of Manassas, Virginia. The HUD complaint alleges that the City of Manassas has discriminated against Hispanic residents and families by enacting, and selectively enforcing, zoning and related regulations that prohibit extended families from living together.

On December 5, 2005, the City of Manassas adopted a zoning provision that narrowed the definition of "family" to make it a crime for extended relatives to live together in a single family home. The new ordinance amendment effectively banned relatives such as aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and cousins from sharing a home. In official statements, City representatives contended that the ordinance was aimed at combating overcrowding and related problems. Contrary to the City's representations, however, Manassas's zoning scheme was not a mechanism for addressing "overcrowding;" it was simply the most egregious in a string of City policies dating to at least 2003 that were designed to foreclose housing opportunities to Manassas' growing Latino population.

The complaint alleges that all of the families charged with violations of the new and restrictive family definition are Hispanic. Although the Manassas City Council suspended enforcement of the zoning amendment on January 11, 2006 due to public uproar, the complaint further alleges that the City has continued its pattern of selective and discriminatory zoning enforcement targeting Hispanic families. Not only has the City retained an "anonymous" overcrowding complaint hotline that has been used to make discriminatory complaints against Hispanic residents and families, but it has also continued to conduct warrantless overcrowding inspections against Hispanic families based solely on the complaints culled from this hotline.

"The decisions in this matter reached by the officials of the City of Manassas attack fundamental freedoms of which most Americans are proud and which I sought to defend during my thirty-two years as an active duty and ready reserve officer with the United States Navy," said Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn, a Navy captain and a founding board member and currently the Executive Director of the Equal Rights Center. "How dare these city leaders unleash their representatives to violate the freedoms and rights of the Hispanic community in their midst! This illegal discrimination must be stopped and the grievances of the victims fully addressed. The ERC refuses to sit idly by and allow these injustices to occur without consequence, especially when they are being perpetrated by the very government officials we are all supposed to trust."

In addition to the complaint filed by the Equal Rights Center, ten Hispanic residents of Manassas have filed housing discrimination complaints with HUD on their own behalf. These complaints allege that the City of Manassas has engaged in selective enforcement of zoning and related laws, illegal harassment, intimidation and coercion, as well as discriminatory attempts to evict Hispanic residents and families based on national origin and familial status.



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“The Federal Fair Housing Act clearly prohibits unequal treatment based on a person’s national origin and familial status,” added Isabelle M. Thabault, Director of the Fair Housing Project at the Washington Lawyers Committee. “The complaints filed today describe a series of actions taken by the City of Manassas with the intent and effect of reducing the size of its Hispanic population. While the City has a legitimate interest in the overall number of people who live in a dwelling, it does not have a legitimate interest in dictating to Hispanic residents *who* they can live with.”

The Equal Rights Center is represented in this complaint by the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the Washington law firm of Beveridge & Diamond, P.C. “Congress adopted the Fair Housing Act in 1968 to counter municipal discrimination such as the policies we see in Manassas,” said Gus B. Bauman of Beveridge & Diamond, P.C.

Originally established in 1983 as the Fair Housing Council of Greater Washington, the Equal Rights Center is a private, not-for-profit, civil rights agency that is the product of mergers with the Fair Employment Council in 1999 and the Disability Rights Council of Greater Washington in 2005. It is dedicated to identifying, challenging, and eliminating discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and government services through education, research, testing, counseling, enforcement, and advocacy. For more information about the Equal Rights Center, please go to www.equalrightscenter.org or call the Equal Rights Center at 202-234-3062.

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. For more information about the Committee, please see www.washlaw.org. The Committee can be reached at 202.319-1000.

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