

## **Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan**

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **FAIR HOUSING CENTER EXPANDS TO 6 COUNTIES**

Thanks to a new federal grant, the Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan (FHC) now provides fair housing enforcement services in Ingham, Jackson, Livingston, Lenawee, Monroe and Washtenaw counties. For victims of illegal housing discrimination, the Fair Housing Center provides undercover testing, investigations, advocacy, advice, education and attorney referral.

“The most common discrimination complaints we get are based on race, disability, and children” said Kristen J. Cuhran, Coordinator of Investigations. “Discrimination can be very subtle, but if you think you have been discriminated against, we encourage you to call us” added Ms. Cuhran.

The Fair Housing Center is a private non-profit organization. Unlike state and federal agencies; the FHC can employ volunteer testers to gather evidence of illegal housing practices. “It is very hard to win a fair housing case without the evidence that comes from testing” said FHC Cooperating Attorney Jonathan G. Weber.

Housing Discrimination is more than a refusal to rent, sell or finance housing. With few exceptions, the law prohibits the following acts when based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, familial status, disability, age and marital status. (Some cities ordinances ban discrimination based on sexual orientation, student status, or source of income):

Steering people and families to or away from a particular neighborhood or a certain part of an apartment complex;

Charging a higher security deposit or offering different terms and conditions, use of facilities, or other services associated with the rental, sale or financing of housing;

Having different qualifying standards, such as closer scrutiny of credit history for some groups while bending the rules for others;

Saying that housing is not available to view, buy, or rent when it is in fact available;

Sexual harassment by an owner or agent;

Harassment of buyers or renters who are exercising their fair housing rights.

Harassment of sellers, rental agents, or real estate agents who refuse to discriminate.

## **Recent Cases of the Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan**

### ***Abrams V Adams, Ypsilanti***



Mitch Abrams contacted the Fair Housing Center to complain that his family was not accepted as tenants in an apartment building near Eastern Michigan University-- Mr. Abrams and his wife, Sue Dible, suspected discrimination. The Abrams-Dible family has two young boys. At the time of the complaint, their six month old baby had a medical condition that prompted them to seek smoke-free housing. The apartment was advertised as “non-smoking”. Testing by the Fair Housing Center produced evidence that supported the claim of discrimination based on familial status. Initially Ms. Dible and Mr. Abrams asked the Fair Housing Center to contact the owner and settle the case without litigation. The owner, John W. Adams, told FHC staff that if he rented to families with kids “all my students would move out” and “all I have is students in there”. When negotiations failed, the family asked for a Fair Housing Center Cooperating Attorney. Attorney Jonathan G. Weber filed the case, which was assigned to Federal District Judge Victoria A. Roberts. The case settled for \$20,000.

### ***Beswick v Arbors at Lakeside, Jackson***

Kathleen Beswick and Robert Wahlberg have disabilities. They the apartment complex staff for a reserved parking space near the entrance of their unit as a reasonable accommodation. Then Fair Housing Center staff asked for the accommodation in writing. Despite promises from the manager, no sign was provided. FHC Cooperating Attorneys Jonathan Rose and Jonathan Weber filed the case in Federal Court on behalf of Ms. Beswick and Mr. Wahlberg in April 2005. The case settled for \$22,500.

### ***Holland et al v Camelot, Ypsilanti Township***



Nikia Holland, an African-American woman, and her white friends Suzanne and Eric Trader accepted \$47,500 to settle a race discrimination case against the owners of Camelot Apartment in Ypsilanti Township. In 2005, Ms. Holland and her friends contacted the FHC with a housing discrimination complaint. Testing evidence supported their claims of race discrimination. Filed United States District Court by FHC Cooperating Attorney Jonathan G. Weber, the case was assigned to Federal Judge Bernard A. Friedman, Case Number 07-10543. Their complaint alleged: the use of racial epithets, harassing white tenants to stay away from

African-American friends and tenants, and failing to make repairs in Ms. Holland's apartment.

### ***Tyus v Fairway Trails, Ypsilanti Township***

After living in Fairway Trails Apartments for three months Harry Tyus asked if, instead of the first week of the month, he could pay his rent after his Social Security disability check arrived. The former tow-truck driver liked the location and convenience of the apartment but not the monthly \$50 late fee on his rent. Fair Housing Center staff made a written request for an accommodation on behalf of Mr. Tyus. Instead of an accommodation, Mr. Tyus received an eviction notice.

Legal Services attorney Henry Wolfe responded to the eviction with fair housing counter claims. In October 2004 Washtenaw County Judge John B. Collins ordered the complex to accommodate Mr. Tyus' request, then the complex refused to renew his lease forcing him to move to a less convenient location. The Fair Housing Center worked with Mr. Tyus to file a HUD complaint. When Fairway Trails was contacted by HUD they initially offered Mr. Tyus \$300 to settle the claim. HUD gave Mr. Tyus the option of taking his case to the Department of Justice. On May 8, 2006 Judith Levy, Assistant US Attorney in Detroit, filed suit claiming retaliation against Mr. Tyus. FHC cooperating attorney Mark Finnegan represented Mr. Tyus. The case was assigned to Judge John C. O'Meara of the US Federal District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Southern Division. The case settled for \$50,000.

Since 1992 the Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan has investigated over 2,200 fair housing complaints like these, with total settlements and conciliations of over \$1,100,000. Formerly known as the Fair Housing Center of Washtenaw County, the Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan expanded fair housing services to Lenawee and Monroe counties in 2002.

In December 2008, FHC received a 3 year Fair Housing Initiatives Program (FHIP) Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This program funds private fair housing organizations to take, investigate and resolve fair housing complaints.

“We look forward to meeting with community leaders in these Counties and working with them to increase housing opportunities” says Ms. Cuhran. “We’ve already started building those relationships but realize there is a lot more work to be done. I am confident that we will see increased awareness of fair housing laws over the next three years.”

The major federal fair housing law is the Fair Housing Act. Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, as amended, prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (including children under the age of 18 living with parents of legal custodians, pregnant women, and people securing custody of children under the age of 18), and disability.

In Michigan, housing discrimination is prohibited by the Elliot-Larsen Civil Rights Act and the Michigan Persons with Disabilities Civil Rights Act. State law includes all federal protections as well as age and marital status.

For more information about the Fair Housing Center and federal, state, and local laws visit our website at [www.fhcmichigan.org](http://www.fhcmichigan.org).

**Attached Photos:** 1) Complainants Mitch Abrams, Sue Dible and their children (photo courtesy of Kristen Cuhran). 2) Complainant Nikia Holland.

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