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MOBILE HOME RESIDENTS FILE DISCRIMINATION LAWSUIT IN FEDERAL COURT AGAINST CITY OF RICHMOND

City's code enforcement campaign is discriminatory and aims to shut down a vital source of affordable housing.

Richmond, Virginia, August 18, 2015 – A group of thirty-two current and former mobile home park residents filed a fair housing lawsuit against the City of Richmond today in federal court after a year of trying to cooperate with the City. The suit alleges that the City's code enforcement campaign against mobile home parks, which began in early 2014, has violated the civil rights of the residents. "We all want a safe home and we want to comply with the code," says Gerardo Martinez, a resident of Mobile Towne mobile home park on Old Midlothian Turnpike. "But we feel like the City is targeting mobile home parks because we are communities of poor, mostly Latino families."

The plaintiffs in the suit are represented by the Legal Aid Justice Center in Richmond and the law firm of Crowell & Moring in Washington, D.C. They allege that the City has violated the residents' civil rights by specifically targeting mobile home parks, where residents are mainly Latino, for aggressive code enforcement with the expectation that hundreds of vulnerable families would be displaced. "Instead of finding ways to help ensure they have safe housing, the City is threatening to shut down the only option many of these families can afford," according to Legal Aid Justice Center attorney Phil Storey.

According to the lawsuit, the City has subjected mobile home residents to harsh enforcement actions that include intrusive inspections with armed police escorts; threats to condemn homes or even bring criminal charges if residents don't allow inspectors inside; and unreasonable and legally unjustified repair standards that make compliance unrealistic. "Some people who were doing everything they could to comply—getting permits and making repairs—the City just condemned their homes and they were left homeless," according to Olivia Leon Vitervo, a plaintiff living in Rudd's Trailer Park on Jefferson Davis Highway. "I watched the City do that to my uncle's family one morning. They didn't seem to care what happened to them."

"Federal civil rights laws protect minorities from policies that disproportionately threaten their access to housing," says Crowell & Moring attorney Clifford Zatz. "That's especially the case when the City could choose less disruptive ways to address safety concerns." According to the

U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Richmond is less than 7% Latino but over 70% of the residents in the City's mobile home parks are Latino. The lawsuit describes multiple attempts since last summer by residents and area nonprofits to resolve the City's safety concerns without risking residents' access to housing. According to the lawsuit, the City consistently rejected or withheld available funding for these alternatives.

The lawsuit asks the court to order the City to stop punitive enforcement actions and to address safety issues in mobile home parks in a way that does not displace the overwhelmingly Latino community. It also seeks damages for the emotional distress and other harms the City's aggressive campaign has caused.

A copy of the lawsuit can be downloaded from www.justice4all.org/get-informed/news/.

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The Legal Aid Justice Center is a Virginia nonprofit that provides free legal assistance and representation for low-income individuals in Virginia who have the least access to legal resources. LAJC's staff of 45 lawyers and professionals work from offices in Richmond, Charlottesville, Falls Church, and Petersburg. See www.justice4all.org for more information.

Crowell & Moring LLP is an international law firm with more than 500 lawyers representing clients in high-stakes litigation and arbitration, regulatory, and transactional matters. The firm is internationally recognized for its representation of Fortune 500 and emerging companies as well as its ongoing commitment to pro bono service, diversity, value-based billing, and legal project management. The firm has offices in Washington, D.C., New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Orange County, Anchorage, London, and Brussels.

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