



HOUSING RIGHTS CENTER

WORKING FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY IN HOUSING

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HOUSING RIGHTS CENTER SECURES LANDMARK SETTLEMENT OF NEARLY \$200,000 IN SECTION 8 HOUSING DISCRIMINATION CASE

LOS ANGELES, CA – NOVEMBER 13, 2024 — The Housing Rights Center (HRC) has reached a landmark settlement in a source of income discrimination case by securing justice for an 84-year-old tenant whose landlord unlawfully refused to accept his federal Housing Choice Voucher which would pay most of his rent. As part of the settlement, the defendants have agreed to pay \$197,500 in damages and attorney's fees and to implement new policies across their rental properties to prevent Section 8 discrimination and promote fair housing practices.

The lawsuit, filed in Ventura County Superior Court in December 2023, highlights the financial and personal toll that tenants experience when they are unable to use their lawful form of income to pay rent. Bulmaro Mendez, the 84-year-old plaintiff in the case, *Mendez, et al v. Press Courier Apartments, LLC et al* (Case Number 2023CUCR017796), had lived in his apartment for five years before finally receiving the federal rental subsidy intended to make his housing costs more manageable. However, his landlord repeatedly refused to accept the voucher, putting Mr. Mendez in a precarious situation. Living on a fixed income of just \$850 per month, he attempted to stave off eviction by making partial rent payments of \$830, leaving him only \$20 a month for essentials. This pushed him into a state of profound hardship, where he frequently went hungry and resorted to asking strangers for money to afford food. After five months of escalating distress and indignity, Mr. Mendez was ultimately forced to leave his home in January 2023, later finding housing with a landlord willing to lawfully accept his voucher.

"This landmark settlement underscores the severe financial and emotional harm landlords cause when they refuse to accept housing vouchers," said **Rodney Leggett, Litigation Director** at the **Housing Rights Center**. "Had the Defendants accepted Mr. Mendez's voucher, his rent contribution would have been just \$132 a month, with the voucher covering the remaining \$1,263. Instead, Mr. Mendez was left scrambling to survive on \$20 a month—a sum so low that he could not afford essentials like food, hygiene items, and clean clothing. No one should have to endure such hardships for the fundamental right to discrimination-free housing, which is vital to well-being and stability."

Although Mr. Mendez faced unique challenges and hardships in his efforts to maintain housing with a rent subsidy, his experience reflects a widespread issue in California, where many voucher holders encounter unlawful barriers when trying to use their housing vouchers. An investigation by the Housing Rights Center uncovered additional discriminatory practices against Section 8 voucher recipients at the defendant's rental properties, including: (1) restricting tenants with vouchers to specific units, (2) charging additional fees to voucher holders, (3) requiring voucher recipients to complete extra application steps, and (4) placing prospective voucher tenants on waitlists while allowing non-voucher tenants immediate access.

Local and state laws protecting voucher recipients from discrimination have been established to ensure fair access to housing. In Los Angeles, an ordinance protecting against voucher discrimination has been in place since 2019, and in January 2020, statewide protections under the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) took effect. These laws prohibit discrimination based on source of income, including Housing Choice Vouchers. Under these protections, landlords are prohibited from refusing to accept Housing Choice Vouchers, advertising "No Section 8," or delaying the paperwork and inspections necessary for voucher approval.

The settlement was reached without an admission of fault by the defendants. However, as part of the agreement, the defendants have committed to implementing a written Section 8 policy in compliance with fair housing laws. They will also attend fair housing training, provide tenants with copies of the California Civil Rights Department's fair housing brochure, and include a statement in all future rental advertisements affirming that the property accepts Section 8 vouchers.

The Housing Rights Center is the nation's largest non-profit civil rights organization dedicated to securing and promoting fair housing. If you believe you have experienced discrimination based on source of income or any other protected class under federal or California law, please contact the Housing Rights Center at **1-800-477-5977** (TTY: 1-213-201-0867) or info@housingrightscenter.org.

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The Housing Rights Center is a non-profit organization established in 1968 to actively support and promote equal opportunity and freedom of residence to all persons without regard to their race, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, familial status, disability, marital status, ancestry, age, source of income, or other characteristics protected by law. HRC engages in activities including outreach and education, testing and investigation, and legal advocacy to identify barriers to fair housing and to counteract and eliminate discriminatory housing practices in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties.