



Fair Housing Enforcement Program

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Aloha!

The Fair Housing Enforcement Program Helps Family Reach Settlement with Hawaii Public Housing Authority to Address National Origin Discrimination and Improve Language Access in Public Housing



Attorney Reyna Ramolete (top left), public housing resident Valantin Sirom (top right), his wife Sasinta Seremea (bottom left), and fair housing outreach specialist and interpreter Emmie Suzuki-Phillip (bottom right) at the Legal Aid Society in downtown Honolulu.

HONOLULU- The Legal Aid Society of Hawaii (Legal Aid), Valantin Sirom, Sasinta Seremea, and their family announced on August 17, 2016 that they have reached a Settlement Agreement with the Hawaii Public Housing Authority (HPHA) resolving a Hawaii Civil Rights Commission (HCRC) and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) complaint alleging that HPHA discriminated against them and their family because of their ancestry/national origin and failed to provide them with meaningful language access in its housing programs.

Hawaii has one of the highest per-capita rates of limited English proficient (LEP) individuals in the U.S.

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About Us

The Fair Housing Enforcement Program (FHEP) is a project of the Legal Aid Society of Hawaii. Our mission is to promote fair housing and end housing discrimination through education, advocacy, outreach, and litigation.

All people in Hawaii have the right to make housing choices without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, familial status, age, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, or HIV infection.

If you believe you have been denied access to housing because of discrimination, you may call the FHEP Hotline at **808-527-8024** or from the Neighbor Islands, **866-527-3247**. Leave a message and our Intake Specialist will call to

Approximately 24% of its residents speak a language other than English at home. Language barriers often prevent members of the immigrant community from obtaining access to the services they need to become self-sufficient.

Mr. Sirom and Mrs. Seremea are LEP individuals and speak Chuukese. In connection with an eviction action, they each signed HPHA's waiver of interpreter form written in English, their minor daughter served as their interpreter at their grievance hearing, and they did not have an interpreter at their eviction hearing. In July of 2015, Legal Aid represented the family in filing a HCRC complaint against HPHA, alleging ancestry/national origin discrimination arising from HPHA's alleged failure to provide the family with interpreters and translate vital documents for the family, including the waiver of interpreter form, lease, and hearing notices.

The parties reached a landmark settlement awarding \$2,000 in monetary damages to the Sirom family, and an agreement by HPHA to adopt and comply with new language access policies and procedures, provide LEP individuals meaningful notice of their right to free language services, translate vital documents, and train staff on language access and fair housing, in addition to other injunctive relief.

Mrs. Seremea remarked, "We are so thankful for everything Reyna and Legal Aid has done for our family. If it wasn't for them our family would be homeless." Mr. Sirom added, "We are grateful to Legal Aid, HPHA, and HCRC for working together as a team to address discrimination and improve language services in public housing. We hope these new changes will help others like we have been helped, so other families will know their rights and won't have to go through what we did."

To read the full press release, [click here](#).

Want more info on Language Access? Check out our [new brochure!](#)

Fair Housing is our kuleana, our right and responsibility. Have you ever felt discriminated against by a housing provider based on your national origin, your familial status, your sex, etc? Share your story with us! [#FairHousingIsOurKuleana](#)



schedule an interview.

One of our staff attorneys will then review your case and determine whether we will be able to provide assistance.

Mahalo to FHEP's volunteer, **Allysen Manding**, and summer law clerk, **Matt Murakami**!



Legal Aid's Fair Housing and Asset-Protection Unit with volunteer Allysen Manding (center with lei) and law clerk Matt Murakami (left with lei)

Ahuwale ka po'okela I kāu hana iā ha'i.

"It is through the way you serve others that your greatness will be felt." - Hawaiian Proverb

The Fair Housing Enforcement Program would like to thank our volunteer, Allysen Manding, and our law clerk, Matt Murakami, for all of their hard work this summer.

Allysen has undertaken several projects in the Fair Housing Enforcement Program with ease and excellence. This fall, she'll be returning to UH Manoa where she is currently studying for her Bachelor's in Political Science and Economics. Best of luck Allysen!

Matt, a law student at George Washington School of Law in Washington D.C., helped attorneys with legal research and even assisted a pro se client with drafting court papers for an illegal lockout. Matt has returned to D.C. to resume his legal studies but we hope to see him back in town one day!

To Matt and Allysen, our warmest mahalo and a hui hou!

Investigation Coordinators Represent Legal Aid's Fair Housing Enforcement Program at Milwaukee Conference



From left to right: Britta Johnson, FHEP Investigation Coordinator, Fred Freiberg, ED of Fair Housing Justice Center in NY, and Marissa Okazaki, FHEP Investigations Coordinator

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Marissa Okazaki and Britta Johnson, Fair Housing Investigation Coordinators, recently attended the ISTEP: Investigative Support for Testing & Enforcement Programs training from August 8-11, 2016 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Both reported learning a great deal about fair housing investigation practices and procedures that they intend to bring back home to Hawaii. Also, Britta Johnson was finally able to meet her long-time hero Fred Freiberg, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the [Fair Housing Justice Center](#) (FHJC). FHJC regularly partners with the [Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council](#) to host these trainings for fair housing organizations around the nation.

Inspiring Fair Housing News

When Not Speaking Fluent English Can Get You Evicted

August 9, 2016

Civil Beat Article by Anita Hofschneider

The Hawaii Public Housing Authority is revamping its policies for providing translation and interpretation services for thousands of residents after settling a discrimination case brought by an immigrant couple.

Valantin Sirom and Sasinta Seremea filed a complaint at the state Civil Rights Commission last summer when they were evicted from public housing after two hearings in which the Housing Authority did not provide an interpreter.

The Legal Aid Society of Hawaii, which represented the couple, contended the housing authority discriminated against them based on their national origin by not providing an interpreter or translating important documents, including a notice informing them of their right to an interpreter.

A Housing Authority board voted to evict Sirom and Seremea last summer, but dismissed their eviction last September after the Legal Aid Society interceded. The couple is listed above with Reyna Ramolette-Hayashi, Fair Housing staff attorney, and Emmie Suzuki-Phillip, Fair Housing outreach specialist and Chuukese interpreter.

Click [here](#) to read the full Civil Beat article.

LGBT Elder Faces Discrimination in Senior Housing

August 1, 2016

A senior home outside of Chicago has been sued by a resident who alleges that her fair housing rights were violated by her housing provider, who failed to take action against other residents who harassed the plaintiff because of her sexual orientation. This case is the first of its kind due to its circumstances of involving discrimination against an elderly gay woman. To read more, click [here](#).

Fair Housing Movement Gets Memorialized

August 5, 2016

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. led a historic march through Chicago's Marquette Park to protest for fair housing rights. Regarding the discrimination blacks faced in housing, MLK said, "There is a gigantic and tragic wall in this city. Behind it is a triple ghetto- race, poverty, and human misery. We've got to have an action program that can remove these walls." To view images of the memorial created by artists Sonja Henderson and John Pitman Weber and read more, click [here](#).

Tester Training for Interested Volunteers

The Fair Housing Tester Program hosts regular tester training for interested volunteers. Candidates must be 18 years and older with no previous felony record, have no open case with the Legal Aid Society, and cannot have an active real estate license.

Please call the Fair Housing Investigation Coordinator at (808) 527-8036 to register and to receive more details, or complete the online [application here](#).

August FHEP Outreaches



FHEP at Celebrate Micronesia!

The Fair Housing Enforcement Program has partnered with [We Are Oceana](#) to provide outreach, education, and on-site intake for legal assistance at St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church in Kalihi.

Where:

St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church

720 N. King Street, HI 96817

When:

Thursdays from 11:30am-2:00pm

If you or anyone you know has a fair housing issue and is interested in applying for Legal Aid services, feel free to come down. A Chuukese interpreter will also be present. For more information on this outreach, please contact Madonna or Shea at (808) 527-8024.

Training Opportunities

Looking for training on the Fair Housing Act?

FHEP offers free training on fair housing. Our training seminar options cover a range of topics from general fair housing information to specific areas such as reasonable accommodation requests, assistance animals, and others. Please contact Madonna or Shea at (808) 527-8024 to schedule a free training on fair housing.

Mahalo for reading!

Please forward this email to other interested parties

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