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April 22, 2008

Mayor Adrian Fenty  
D.C. City Council Members  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Mayor Fenty and D.C. City Council Members:

As advocates of domestic violence survivors, we are supporting a new report being released by the Equal Rights Center (ERC) that sheds light on the grim injustices these survivors have to face when searching for housing in the District of Columbia.

Survivors of domestic violence often face multiple injustices. After suffering through domestic abuse, they then are forced to endure discrimination in many areas of their lives simply because of their status as a survivor. One of the most serious problems that survivors face is discrimination in housing. Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness among women all across the United States. The District, unfortunately, has demonstrated **both** a high level of domestic violence, **and** the highest homelessness rate in the nation.

The *2005 Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act* added protections against discrimination for victims of domestic violence in Public and Section 8 housing in recognition of the widespread problem of denial of housing to victims of domestic violence. However, the federal law does not protect survivors living in private housing.

To bridge the gap in the federal law and ensure protections for survivors in all forms of housing, the D.C. City Council passed cutting-edge legislation in 2006 to provide survivors of domestic violence with the most progressive protections in the country against housing discrimination. The *Protection from Discriminatory Eviction for Victims of Domestic Violence Amendment Act of 2006* protects survivors of domestic violence in three important ways:

- First, from being denied housing because of a current or past history of domestic abuse,
- Second, from being evicted if a domestic violence incident occurs after they have found housing, and
- Third, by allowing them to terminate their lease without penalty if they need to flee an abusive situation or to ensure their safety in their current housing without fear of recrimination by the landlord.

According to a 2005 report conducted throughout numerous cities, 50 percent of homeless women surveyed identified domestic violence as a primary cause of local homelessness. In the D.C. metropolitan area alone, more than 1,300 homeless women surveyed in 2004 reported being victims of domestic violence.

The Equal Rights Center, a non-profit civil rights organization, recently completed a two-month long investigation, evaluating the extent to which housing providers in the District were in compliance with this new law. The report determines whether, and to what extent, domestic violence survivors in the District were subjected to discriminatory treatment when inquiring about available rental properties. Discriminatory treatment was defined as being denied housing (both outright and indirect), or being offered adverse terms and conditions in order to obtain housing.

The study found that 65 percent of test applicants associated with domestic violence were subjected to at least one form of discriminatory treatment. Of that statistic, 9 percent of test applicants associated with domestic violence were denied housing outright or had housing made unavailable to them – something that *never* happened to test applicants who were not associated with domestic violence. The other 56 percent of test applicants associated with domestic violence were subjected to adverse terms and conditions

Although the Equal Rights Center's study focused on the nation's capital, this is not an issue that only affects the District of Columbia. Discrimination against domestic violence survivors is a national problem that is happening in every city, in every state. If this sort of discrimination is happening in a city where it **is** against the law to discriminate based on one's status as a domestic violence survivor, it certainly is taking place throughout the rest of the country, where it is **not** against the law to discriminate based on this status.

The results from this study paint a grim picture for domestic violence survivors and the advocates who are trying to find rental housing for them in the District of Columbia – a city that should exemplify our highest ideals. There is still much to do to ensure that survivors of domestic violence are not discriminated against because of the domestic abuse they have suffered.

The law stands to play an essential role in reducing homelessness in the District by preventing illegal evictions and denials of housing due to status as a domestic violence victim. However, it can only do so if the new law's requirements are known and understood by domestic violence survivors and landlords alike. Moreover, private enforcement against those who engage in illegal discrimination is required in those instances where landlord's behavior is not appropriately modified.

We are asking you to ensure that all landlords, property owners and managers and anyone else who is directly affected by this law is knowledgeable, so we can end this discrimination. We hope this report will serve as an initial platform for educating domestic violence victims, their advocates, landlords and the general public about this aspect of civil rights in the District of Columbia.

The Equal Rights Center's report is just the first step in a far-reaching and extensive education and enforcement effort that will begin only with the help and cooperation of our elected officials.

Sincerely,

Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
Asian Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Resource Project  
Ayuda  
Break the Cycle  
DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
Deaf Abused Women's Network  
Domestic Violence Legal Empowerment and Appeals Project  
House of Ruth  
Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
My Sister's Place  
National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty  
National Network to End Domestic Violence  
Ramona's Way  
Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment  
Women Empowered Against Violence  
Women's Coalition of St. Croix