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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Connecticut Fair Housing Center Announces \$180,000 Settlement
in Case Alleging Race Discrimination by the Mansfield Housing Authority**

The Connecticut Fair Housing Center (“the Center”) announces the settlement of a race discrimination case brought on behalf of Equalla Jenkins against the Mansfield Housing Authority (MHA) and its Executive Director, Rebecca Fields. Under the consent decree entered August 1 in the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut, the defendants have agreed to end certain practices that discourage or deny equal access to housing opportunities for African Americans and pay \$180,000 in damages, costs and fees.

The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program is the main program funded by the federal government to help low-income families afford quality housing in the private market. The MHA administers the HCV program for Mansfield and four other nearby towns, Ashford, Coventry, Chaplin, and Willington, all of which are disproportionately White. The demographic makeup of households in these communities ranges from 89.8% to 96.2% White and between 0% and 1.2% African American.

The complaint filed in February alleged that the defendants’ policies and practices discouraged and denied African Americans equal access to the HCV program by making it more difficult for applicants who lived outside of the MHA’s five-town area to apply, qualify for and secure vouchers. The alleged impermissible policies included a residency preference for existing residents of the MHA service area and a minimum income requirement that both violates HUD’s rules and disproportionately impacts households of color.

The lawsuit also challenged the defendants’ repeated emphasis on a lack of public transit and the “rural” character as potential negatives of living in the MHA service area. This language was intended to discourage applications from what Defendant Fields described as “urbanites” who “have not ventured far from their urban surroundings” and could “hate it, because it is too dark, too quiet, [and] they are afraid because there are ‘no people around.’” In contrast with the MHA service area, Connecticut’s urban centers are overwhelmingly non-White, particularly among households that are income-eligible for the HCV program.

Ms. Jenkins applied for MHA’s HCV program to access the high-quality schools and other opportunities the area affords. Although she was fully qualified to receive a voucher, the defendants denied her access to the program because they decided that she would not be able to meet the improper minimum income standard. In fact, Ms. Jenkins had a job and sufficient income, but the defendants speculated that she would be unable to maintain her employment in Middletown once she moved to the MHA service area because of the purported lack of public transit options. Even after Ms. Jenkins presented a plan for her commute, the defendants declared that it was “financially unfeasible and unrealistic to believe that someone will travel many hours to work at a job that is part-time and/or paying just over minimum wage,” and refused to restore her eligibility. As a result of the defendants’ actions, Ms. Jenkins and her child were homeless.

At the same time the defendants were highlighting the lack of public transit to deny Ms. Jenkins and discourage low-income “urbanites” from applying to live in the area, the MHA publicly advertised that its senior housing had access to the Windham Region Transit District’s “low cost transportation to the Willimantic shopping district and to the Four Corners area of Mansfield.” Similarly, the Town of Mansfield touted the development of the Nash-Zimmer Transportation Center, described as a “central transportation node” offering public and private inter-city transit options connecting Mansfield to cities and towns throughout Connecticut and beyond.

According to the Center’s Legal Director, Greg Kirschner, “Housing Choice Vouchers play a vital role in making quality housing in areas of opportunity available for all of Connecticut’s residents, regardless of race. Discriminatory barriers to these programs are unacceptable because they perpetuate segregation, a problem that tragically continues to persist in Connecticut.”

The MHA provided Ms. Jenkins with a voucher after the Center filed this case. Under the consent decree, the MHA has agreed not to discourage prospective tenants from applying for its programs and to develop an affirmative fair housing marketing plan to advertise openings in its HCV program. The MHA also agreed to eliminate certain policies identified in the complaint as discriminatory, such as the illegal requirement that applicants have to earn a minimum income to be eligible for a voucher, and to require all staff to undergo fair housing training.

The Connecticut Fair Housing Center is a statewide nonprofit civil rights organization dedicated to ensuring that all people have equal access to housing opportunities in Connecticut. For more about our work, please visit www.ctfairhousing.org.

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