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Woman gets \$110K for discrimination claim

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A Superior Court judge has awarded nearly \$110,000 in damages to a woman who filed a housing discrimination claim against a Manchester landlord.

The woman, a survivor of domestic violence identified only as "Ms. Palmer," had been temporarily staying on her cousin's couch when she obtained a security deposit guarantee from the state Department of Social Services to rent an apartment in Manchester, according to Connecticut Fair Housing Center spokeswoman Catherine Blinder.

The program helps tenants who don't have the money for a security deposit to get a guarantee from the department.

Palmer attempted to rent a unit at Brook Haven Apartments on West Middle Turnpike from Kenneth Burkamp, a local landlord, but the security deposit guarantee was refused and the woman was denied the apartment, Blinder said.

Palmer then contacted the fair housing organization, which assigned lawyer Timothy Bennett-Smyth to the case. Hartford Superior Court Judge Vernon D. Oliver in a ruling last month awarded Palmer \$109,788 in compensatory damages and lawyers' fees after finding Burkamp had violated state law.

Oliver ruled that if "Burkamp were allowed to simply 'opt out' of compliance with the statutory framework and thwart anti-discrimination laws designed to provide prospective tenants with an opportunity to acquire suitable housing regardless of source of income, then the work the legislature and the courts would be a sham."

Bennett-Smyth said the violation of fair housing laws "disproportionately affects people of color, single mothers, persons with disabilities, and domestic violence survivors." He said landlords who refuse to participate in the state-sponsored program cause "real harm, and it is unacceptable."

The lawyer added: "Hopefully, this decision by the court will put all housing providers on notice of the importance of complying with the Connecticut Human Rights Act."

The nonprofit Connecticut Fair Housing Center describes itself as an organization "dedicated to ensuring that all people, principally those with scarce financial resources, have equal access to housing opportunities in Connecticut."

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