

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – MARCH 10, 2015

Public Housing Conditions Lawsuit Settled

A class-action lawsuit on behalf of residents of the 364-unit Mayor Wright Homes public housing project has been resolved after significant improvements to the conditions at the property.

A press conference is scheduled for 11:00am on March 10th at the offices of Alston Hunt Floyd & Ing, 1001 Bishop Street, Suite 1800, Honolulu, HI 96813. A Mayor Wright tenant involved with the case and the attorneys who represented the tenants will be available for questions.

HONOLULU - The Hawai'i Circuit Court has approved the settlement of a class action lawsuit challenging unsafe and unsanitary conditions at the Mayor Wright Homes public housing project. The lawsuit—brought on behalf of Mayor Wright tenants by the non-profit Hawai'i Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice and its co-counsel, Alston Hunt Floyd & Ing—resulted in dramatic improvements at the 364-unit apartment complex. However, housing advocates remain concerned about conditions faced by low-income renters throughout the state.

The lawsuit was filed in April 2011. At the time, most of the tenants at Mayor Wright did not have hot water—a problem that had persisted for years. Residents were afraid to leave their homes due to problems with security and a spate of assaults and murders at the property. Leaks from a decaying plumbing systems caused mold problems throughout the project. Residents also complained of overflowing dumpsters; rat, roach and bed bug infestations; and shoddy repairs, if maintenance was performed at all. Some residents had kitchen sinks falling through deteriorating countertops "fixed" with duct tape. Others had gaping holes in their bathroom walls providing easy access by vermin intent on invading tenants' apartments—holes that were left for months after maintenance staff attempted to fix plumbing problems, but failed to seal up the repairs. In the years leading up to the filing of the lawsuit and even after, the property twice failed inspections by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In response to the lawsuit, the State of Hawai'i invested over \$4.5 million to bring conditions of the property up to an acceptable standard and, under the settlement agreement, it is continuing to make critical repairs necessary to ensure that the dwellings at Mayor Wright are habitable. The settlement also includes a \$350,000 payment to compensate residents for years of enduring the decrepit conditions, and to cover a portion of the costs of the suit. Now, the State is evaluating plans to redevelop the property.

"This case pushed the State to live up to its responsibilities as a landlord," said one of the tenants' attorneys, Paul Alston. "Years of tenant complaints, reports in the media about problems at Mayor Wright, and poor results on federal inspections apparently were not enough. It took a court case to make things right, and we are pleased with how things have shaped up."

While advocates for the tenants are happy with the results at the Mayor Wright project, they are concerned about the broader outlook for public housing tenants across the state. According to recent media reports, Hawai'i's public housing projects have an immediate repair and maintenance backlog of around \$275 million. Yet the current administration's proposed budget has cut the Hawai'i Public Housing Authority's budget request from \$180 million to \$5 million.

After Hawai'i Appleseed and Alston Hunt brought cases challenging conditions at the two largest public housing projects in the state—first Kuhio Park Terrace and then Mayor Wright Homes—the legislature quadrupled the amount of funding appropriated for public housing maintenance, with \$71 million appropriated in 2014. According to Hawaii Appleseed's Executive Director, Victor Geminiani, "The state appears to be reverting back to its prior practice of failing to properly fund and maintain its public housing facilities as required by law. That failure led to the successful law suits to correct the deplorable conditions at Mayor Wrights and Kuhio Park Terrace, the state's two largest housing projects. People need a safe, decent place to raise their families to break out of the generational cycle of poverty. We need to do better, or the long-term costs of this neglect is going to come back to haunt us."

MEDIA CONTACT INFORMATION

The Hawai'i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice (hiappleseed.org) advocates on behalf of low-income people in Hawai'i to help them gain access to the resources, services, and fair treatment that they need to realize their opportunities for self-achievement and economic security. For additional information, contact

Victor Geminiani by email at victor@hiappleseed.org or by phone at (808) 227-3845.

Alston Hunt Floyd & Ing was founded in 1991, under the core principle of making the law and Hawai'i better for all, with high-quality, fast, cost-effective service. For additional information, contact

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