

Owners of local apartments to pay \$45K to settle discrimination complaints



Beth LeBlanc, Lansing State Journal 5:39 p.m. EDT October 5, 2016



(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

LANSING - The owners of several Lansing-area apartment complexes will pay about \$45,000 in fines and penalties in response to complaints they refused to rent one-bedroom apartments to people with young children.

Rental manager Sudi Hopper and three corporate entities that own seven apartment complexes in the Lansing area agreed to a \$25,000 settlement in federal court in late August, according to a statement. Hopper was a part-owner of the units, according to her lawyer. The corporations involved are Parkside East Inc., Holt Manor Inc. and Kelly Manor, Inc.

The settlement was the second for Hopper and the facilities, which agreed to pay \$20,000 to settle a civil suit over the same issue with the Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan in October 2015.

The housing agency uncovered the issue at the apartment complexes by sending undercover "testers" posing as potential tenants to housing complexes.

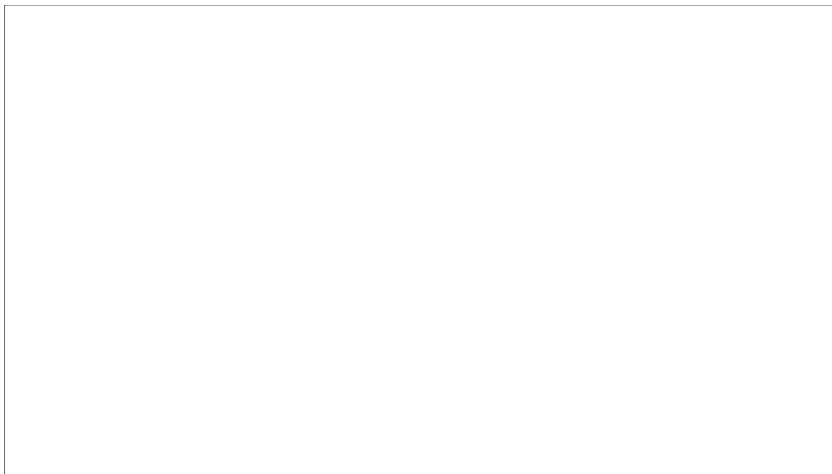
"That's really the only way to find out what the people in the housing industry are doing," said Pam Kisch, executive director of the Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan, which is funded in part by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"Your landlord should not be telling you what the sleeping arrangements should be in your own house."

Kisch said testers found that prospective renters who had a child were told that children were not allowed in one-bedroom units.

The seven complexes involved in the case were Parkside East Apartments in East Lansing, C and H Apartments in Holt, Camelot Apartments in Lansing, Park Place Apartments in Williamston, Holt Manor Apartments in Holt, Kelly Manor Apartments in Owosso and Pine Cove Apartments in DeWitt.

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Joseph Falcone, Hopper's lawyer, said his client misunderstood guidelines from local housing authorities.

"As a result, my clients thought that people who had children had to have at least a two-bedroom apartment," Falcone said.

Falcone said any violation of the Fair Housing Act was unintentional.

The Fair Housing Center filed a lawsuit against Hopper and the involved properties in May 2015 and reached a \$20,000 settlement later that year.

The U.S. Department of Justice filed a second lawsuit against Hopper and the properties in November 2015 and reached a settlement in late August 2016. The defendants agreed to pay \$5,000 in civil penalties and to set up a settlement fund of \$20,000 to compensate victims.

The settlement also required the defendants to inform their tenants of the complexes' "new nondiscriminatory policies" and provide training to employees on the Fair Housing Act.

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"Adequate housing is a fundamental need for families and equal access to that housing must be protected," U.S. Attorney Patrick Miles said in a statement. "Our ongoing actions to enforce the Fair Housing Act provide that protection."

People who believe they may been a victim of discriminatory policies at the apartment complexes should contact the federal housing discrimination tip line at (800) 896-7743.

"This is someone who owns a lot of units and if they, as we hope and assume, change their behavior, it's going to open up apartments to a lot of people," Kisch said.

The FHC represents eight counties, including Clinton, Eaton, Ingham and Livingston counties, and takes about 150 complaints a year, Kisch said.

Contact [Beth LeBlanc](mailto:eleblanc@gannett.com) (staff/15321/beth-leblanc/) at (517) 377-1167, eleblanc@gannett.com (<mailto:eleblanc@gannett.com>), or on Twitter [@LSJBethLeBlanc](https://twitter.com/LSJBethLeBlanc) (<https://twitter.com/LSJBethLeBlanc>).

How to file a complaint

People who feel they are a victim of housing discrimination while attempting to or renting housing can file a complaint with the Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan, which represents most counties in the Lansing area at www.fhcmichigan.org or 1-877-979-3247, or call the federal housing discrimination tip line at (800) 896-7743.

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