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Landlord, manager named in federal suit

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BY ART AISNER

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Washtenaw County Commissioner Ronnie Peterson and a man who manages his Ypsilanti Township rental units are named in a federal lawsuit alleging sexual harassment of female tenants.

The suit, filed Thursday by the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division in Detroit federal court, alleges manager Glen E. Johnson subjected female tenants to a pattern of harassment, including pervasive sexual advances and entering their homes without permission or warning, a government news release stated.

Peterson, D-Ypsilanti, who owns at least 11 single-family homes in the township, is not accused of directly harassing tenants. The lawsuit says he's liable for Johnson's actions because he knew or should have known they were improper and failed to take preventative measures.

The suit seeks unspecified monetary damages.

Don Ferris, Peterson's attorney, said the case against the commissioner is baseless.

"He's mortified by this," Ferris said Thursday afternoon. "He's extremely disappointed the government filed this totally unfounded lawsuit while he has a well-earned reputation of giving his entire life to his community and to charitable causes, including equal rights and civil rights."

"We're going to take this to trial because they have no case."

The suit says Johnson took adverse action against women who refused or objected to his sexual advances and denied them tangible housing benefits like maintenance repairs.

"The conduct alleged in today's complaint is unacceptable - as well as a violation of our federal fair housing laws," Acting U.S. Attorney Terrence Berg said in a prepared statement. "We are taking action because no one should face such inappropriate harassment in their own homes."

Ferris said Johnson never officially worked for Peterson and was a volunteer who wanted to learn more about the property management business. Ferris said Peterson became aware of the accusations last year and offered to take a polygraph test to prove he was unaware of those allegations.

Johnson, reached at his Ypsilanti Township home by phone Thursday, confirmed he's not Peterson's employee and referred questions to Ann Arbor attorney Bob McCoy. McCoy said he hadn't yet seen the complaint Thursday afternoon and declined further comment.

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