

Justice Department Announces Nationwide Initiative to Combat Sexual Harassment in Housing

As the Department of Justice recognized the 50th Anniversary of the Fair Housing Act on Thursday, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the nationwide rollout of an initiative aimed at increasing awareness and reporting of sexual harassment in housing.

The announcement includes an interagency task force between the Justice Department and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to combat sexual harassment in housing, an outreach toolkit, and a public awareness campaign. This three-pronged approach will strengthen the Department's efforts to combat sexual harassment in housing.

"Sexual harassment in housing is illegal, immoral, and unacceptable," said Attorney General Sessions. "It is all too common today, as too many landlords, managers, and their employees attempt to prey on vulnerable women. We will not hesitate to pursue these predators and enforce the law. In October, I ordered a new initiative to bring more of these cases, and we have already won relief for 15 victims. Today, we announce three new steps to make the initiative more effective and to win more cases. I want to thank the dedicated and committed professionals in our Civil Rights Division and our partners in the Department of Housing and Urban Development for their hard work in this effort. We will continue to aggressively pursue harassers because everyone has a right to be safe in their home."

"Sexual harassment by landlords, property managers,

maintenance workers, and others with power over housing often affect the most vulnerable populations,” said U.S. Attorney Lelling said. “This conduct is an egregious violation of a person’s right to fair housing, and my Office’s Civil Rights Unit is dedicated to aggressively investigating such allegations and vigorously enforcing the law.”

“All discrimination stains the very fabric of our nation, but HUD is especially focused on protecting the right of everyone to feel safe and secure in their homes, free from unwanted sexual harassment,” said Secretary Ben Carson. “No person should have to tolerate unwanted sexual advances in order to keep a roof over his or her head. Part of our mission at HUD is to provide safe housing and we will remain diligent in this mission to protect those we serve. I look forward to working with Attorney General Sessions and the Department of Justice as part of this task force to bring an end to this type of discrimination.”

In October 2017, the Justice Department announced an initiative to combat sexual harassment in housing and launched pilot programs in D.C. and the Western District of Virginia. The initiative sought to increase the Department’s efforts to protect women from harassment by landlords, property managers, maintenance workers, security guards, and other employees and representatives of rental property owners. During the pilots, the Department developed and tested ways to better connect both with victims of sexual harassment in housing and with those organizations that victims may turn to first for help – including law enforcement, legal services providers, public housing authorities, sexual assault services providers, and shelters. The Department also tested certain aspects of the initiative in other jurisdictions, including New Jersey, the Central District of California, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Michigan.

The two pilot programs generated an upswing in harassment reporting to the Department from both D.C. and the Western

District of Virginia. In D.C., the Department generated six leads since the October 2017 launch. In Virginia, the Department generated three leads. While the Justice Department recognizes that leads and investigations do not always lead to enforcement actions, the pilot program's results—when extrapolated across all the U.S. Attorney's Offices across the country—could lead to hundreds of new reports of sexual harassment in housing across the country.

Because of these promising results, the Department is rolling out three major components to the Initiative.

First, the new HUD-DOJ Task Force to Combat Sexual Harassment in Housing will drive a shared strategy between the Department and HUD for combatting sexual harassment in housing across the country. It will focus on five key areas: continued data sharing and analysis, joint development of training, evaluation of public housing complaint mechanisms, coordination of public outreach and press strategy, and review of federal policies.

Second, the outreach toolkit is designed to leverage the Justice Department's nationwide network of U.S. Attorney's Offices. The toolkit provides templates, guidance, and checklists based on pilot program feedback. It ultimately will amplify available enforcement resources and help victims of sexual harassment connect with the Department.

Third, the public awareness campaign has three major components: a partnership package with relevant stakeholders, launch of a social media campaign, and Public Service Announcements (PSAs) run by individual U.S. Attorney's offices. The campaign is specifically designed to raise awareness, and make it easier for victims all over the country to find resources and report harassment.

More information about the Civil Rights Division and the civil rights laws it enforces is available at www.usdoj.gov/crt.

Individuals who believe that they may have been victims of sexual harassment in housing should call the Department at 1-844-380-6178, send an e-mail to fairhousing@usdoj.gov (link sends e-mail), or contact HUD at 1-800-669-9777. If you have information or questions about any other housing discrimination, you can contact the Department at 1-800-896-7743.