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Safe at home: woman alleging sexual assault by landlord settles lawsuit.

Legal Voice defends women's right to safety, emphasizing fair housing laws.

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Legal Voice announced today that a settlement has been reached in the lawsuit brought by a Grays Harbor County woman who alleged that she had been sexually assaulted by her landlord.

Legal Voice, a non-profit women's rights organization, filed this case last year on behalf of Heather Russell. The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Tacoma, alleged that Ms. Russell had been sexually assaulted by her landlord in the summer of 2008. The lawsuit raised claims for discrimination and retaliation under the federal Fair Housing Act and Washington's Law Against Discrimination.

At the time of the alleged assault, Ms. Russell was caring for her four children while her husband was in the hospital with severe work-related injuries. Shortly after the alleged assault, Ms. Russell's landlord terminated her rental agreement.

The case has been settled by mutual agreement of the parties. The terms of the settlement are confidential. Brian Buckley and Kit Roth of Fenwick & West LLP, along with Catherine Borden of DLA Piper, served as co-counsel with Legal Voice for Ms. Russell.

"We're proud of Ms. Russell for having the courage to come forward," said Legal Voice attorney David Ward. "We hope more women will do the same."

Across the country, thousands of women are sexually assaulted or harassed each year by their landlords or by their landlord's employees. A national survey of programs serving sexual assault survivors found that 59% had received at least one report of sexual assault or rape by a landlord in the previous year.

Women's rights. Nothing less.

In some cases, landlords have demanded sexual favors from tenants in exchange for basic housing benefits, such as repairs to their homes. In other cases, landlords have sexually assaulted tenants or have repeatedly subjected tenants to sexually degrading comments and behavior. This abuse is particularly terrifying because the perpetrator has a key to the victim's home. However, tenants often do not report the abuse because they fear retaliation and cannot afford to move.

In the past year, Legal Voice has brought two lawsuits in Washington on behalf of women who alleged sexual assault or harassment by their landlords. In addition to Ms. Russell's case, Legal Voice filed a lawsuit on behalf of Yvonne Moore in King County Superior Court that alleges sexual harassment and retaliation by her landlord. Ms. Moore's case is scheduled for trial next year.

These lawsuits are part of Legal Voice's continuing efforts to fight sexual harassment in housing. Last year, Legal Voice worked with allies at the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs and Columbia Legal Services to persuade the Legislature to enact a bill that provides tenants in Washington with stronger remedies if they are sexually assaulted or unlawfully harassed by their landlords. This law provides tenants in those cases with greater opportunities to terminate their leases without penalty or to change their locks.

"Tenants need to know they don't have to take sexual harassment by their landlords," said Mr. Ward of Legal Voice. "They have remedies and they can fight back. Everyone has the right to be safe in their own home."

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