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Group of N.O. landlords agrees to settle bias lawsuit, feds say

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By **Times-Picayune Staff**

The Justice Department said a group of New Orleans landlords has agreed to pay \$70,000 in damages and penalties to settle a lawsuit alleging that they denied housing to African-American prospective renters at an apartment building, in violation of the federal Fair Housing Act.



Thomas E. Perez, assistant attorney general for civil rights

The agreement, which still needs the approval of a federal judge in Louisiana, was announced Monday.

The settlement would resolve a lawsuit alleging that the defendants -- Betty Bouchon, the Bouchon Limited Family Partnership and Sapphire Corp. -- discriminated against the prospective renters. The allegations were based on fair-housing testing conducted by the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center.

The lawsuit alleged that Betty Bouchon, the building manager, failed to return calls from African-American testers while returning phone calls from white testers, made statements to white testers indicating that she would not rent to black people, and falsely told an African-American tester that an apartment was not available for rent when in fact it was available.

In a taped interview with a white tester, Bouchon boasted about how safe the apartment and its neighborhood were. "One of the only safe ones left because we don't have any blacks here," she said.

On another recording, Bouchon explained why she had been playing phone tag with the white mystery shopper. "There's so many blacks, so many blacks. I can't answer my phone. I don't answer my phone. I have to listen to my voicemail and call you back."

In a written statement, Thomas E. Perez, assistant attorney general for civil rights, said: "In these challenging economic times, it is more important than ever that all Americans be able to rent or buy housing they can afford, and not face discrimination because of the color of their skin."

Under the terms of the settlement, the defendants will pay \$50,000 to the Fair Housing Action Center and \$20,000 in civil penalties to the United States. The settlement also requires the defendants to adopt nondiscriminatory policies, keep detailed records of inquiries from all prospective tenants and of rental transactions, including phone logs, and submit periodic reports over the four-year term of the settlement.

In December, the Fair Housing Action Center filed suit against Bouchon and the partnership after receiving two unrelated complaints of discrimination from renters who tried to rent apartments at a 16-unit complex at 4919 Canal St. Later, the Department of Justice also filed suit, separately, against the landlords.

Monday's proposed settlement would resolve both cases.

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