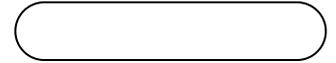


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City Of Howell Settles Suit Over Proposed Sober Living Home

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Jessica Mathews / news@whmi.com

After a roughly three-year legal battle, a settlement has been reached in a federal discrimination lawsuit filed against the City of Howell over a local non-profit's attempt to open a sober living home for women in recovery.

The lawsuit was filed against the City in U.S. District Court in Detroit by The Amber Reineck House, its Founder and President Courtney Atsalakis, and the Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan. The City recently settled the case for \$750,000.

Courtney Atsalakis founded the Amber Reineck House in 2017 in memory of her sister, Amber Reineck, who died of a fentanyl overdose in 2015. The non-profit had been working to open a sober living home for women in Livingston County, where the only other sober living options are for men.

In July of 2018, the City instituted a moratorium for all special land use requests for un-related persons living together in single family residential districts in order to craft two ordinances. It's a specific type of housing not really addressed in codes and officials wanted to craft guidelines for those looking to apply.



The City had received an application from the Amber Reineck House for a recovery supportive services home at 304 South Walnut Street targeting women recovering from addiction but the application was eventually withdrawn and the moratorium enacted. The suit alleged the City took various actions in direct response to significant community opposition to the proposed home, which was based on discriminatory bias against persons recovering from substance use disorders.

The City has since adopted ordinances that changed zoning to modify standards for transitional housing uses and added standards for special accommodation uses while also creating a licensing process for uses approved as transitional housing facilities or sober living homes.

Atsalakis told WHMI she's excited that they mutually agreed to settle the case - saying it's not just about the Amber Reineck House vs. City of Howell. She said it's a landmark case for all cities versus sober living facilities. Atsalakis said she hopes this case sets precedent so cities do not discriminate against people with disabilities and welcome them move into their communities - adding she hopes this stops the stigma related to substance use disorder and people learn to treat people who struggle with this disease without discrimination but also see the value these women bring to the community.

Atsalakis commented further that even though they had a settlement of \$750,000, that is not what the Amber Reineck House received. After a long 3 ½ year legal battle, she said most of their money was to attorney fees. However, Atsalakis stressed "this was never about money, it was about the above statement, reducing the stigma associated with substance use disorder and welcoming them into our community without judgment, I am excited to move forward with the City of Howell in a friendly working relationship. My main goal now and same as it has always been to serve Howell and greater Livingston County with resources for the recovery community".

The City also released a statement regarding the settlement, saying contrary to the representation by the plaintiff's, it was not a victory and the City and its legal team remained confident that the City's case was strongly supported by the facts of the case. It states prior to the settlement, the court had dismissed five of the nine claims set forth in the complaint. The City said "Most importantly, these dismissals upheld the Ordinance enacted by the City, contrary to the Plaintiff's position that such ordinances were unconstitutional". Further, it noted the case was settled without trial, with the City not admitting to any liability and settling a disputed claim.

The release states both parties negotiated in good faith after almost 3 years of litigation and discovery, as legal fees continued to escalate on both sides. The City says it believes that it was never discriminatory during anytime in dealing with Atsalakis and "will continue to work with ARH and other similar facilities in their efforts to assist the safe and healthy recovery of women

ravaged by this addiction”.

The full press release from the City is attached.

A link to the Amber Reineck House webpage is provided.

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| Attachment: | Press release regarding Reineck settlement.pdf |
| Web Link: | https://www.amberreineckhouse.org/#/ |

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