

HOWELL

## Howell agrees to pay \$750K in sober house discrimination suit

**Tess Ware** Livingston Daily

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: A release regarding this settlement was sent in error to media last week, and has now been confirmed.*

HOWELL — A women's sober living house is on the receiving end of a landmark discrimination settlement with the city of Howell, agreeing to \$750,000 amid claims the city kept it from opening for months.

The Amber Reineck House was founded by Courtney Atsalakis, who lost her sister, Amber Reineck, to a fentanyl overdose on Christmas Eve 2015. She said Reineck, a 33-year-old single mother, had become addicted to opiate painkillers after a work injury and was reluctant to seek help due to the stigma surrounding drug addiction.

Atsalakis founded the nonprofit in hopes of reducing that stigma and providing housing and treatment services to those seeking long-term recovery.

But the project ran into challenges from the start, with neighbors of the home at 304 S. Walnut St. concerned about another group home in the area. Atsalakis at first pulled a permit request from the city's planning commission to "let things settle down," but when it was reintroduced, the lawsuit says, the city imposed a moratorium on new sober living and other group homes for 20 months.

The organization, Atsalakis, and a local fair housing agency filed suit, claiming the move was discriminatory against the perceived disability of the home's future residents. Addiction is considered a disability under federal law. The ban lifted in March 2020 and the Amber Reineck House was able to open in another location.

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“This settlement is a victory not just for the Amber Reineck House, but for Michigan women who struggle with addiction,” Atsalakis wrote in a release Tuesday, June 20. “Because of homes like ours, people have a safe, sober place to focus on their recovery without distractions.

“Nearly 25 women have been served since our doors opened in 2021. People who suffer from substance abuse aren’t criminals, and shouldn’t be discriminated against and treated as though they are. We’re glad that the lawsuit has been resolved so that we can focus on our mission — serving the community in Howell and greater Livingston County.”

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