

# Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan

PO Box 7825, Ann Arbor, MI 48107 (877) 979-FAIR

[fhcmichigan.org](http://fhcmichigan.org)

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 22, 2023

Media Contacts: Pamela A. Kisch, (734) 636-0860

## Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan Aides in \$750,000 Disability Lawsuit Settlement

In case you missed it, the Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan (FHC) aided in the settlement of a \$750,000 lawsuit against the City of Howell.

When the FHC read about the City of Howell's treatment of the Amber Reineck House we contacted founder Courtney Atsalakis offering our help. We started by writing a letter to the City asking them to lift the moratorium and to grant Amber Reineck House a reasonable accommodation so they could open a house for women recovering from substance use disorders. The letter was accompanied by a memo from Relman, Dane & Colfax (now Relman Colfax) outlining over a dozen settled cases that refuted the City's arguments. People in recovery are considered disabled under the Federal Fair Housing Act. When the City still refused to lift the moratorium, Ms. Atsalakis decided to file a lawsuit and the FHC Board voted to join the litigation.

Please see the Relman Colfax Press Release below for more details.

A copy of the filed complaint, *Amber Reineck House v City of Howell, Filed 1/27/20*, can be sent upon request.



Image of 304 Walnut Street, Zillow

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*The Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan, founded in 1992, actively protects the civil rights of those who are discriminated against in the rental, sale, or financing of housing through investigation, education, advocacy, and legal action. The FHC takes an average of 250 complaints each year from its ten-county service area – Clinton, Eaton, Hillsdale, Ingham, Jackson, Lenawee, Livingston, Monroe, Shiawassee, and Washtenaw.*

*The work that provided the basis for this publication was supported by funding under a grant with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. The author and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in this publication. Such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Federal Government.*

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## **MICHIGAN CITY TO PAY \$750K FOR BLOCKING OPENING OF WOMEN'S SOBER LIVING HOME, AS OPIOID CRISIS RAGES**

### ***Federal Housing Discrimination Settlement Obtained by Recovery House, Named for Woman Who Died of Fentanyl Overdose***

Howell, MI— A women's sober living house in Howell, Michigan, named for a woman who died of a fentanyl overdose, is among the recipients of a \$750,000 settlement against the city that blocked it from opening for years. The housing discrimination settlement on behalf of Amber Reineck House, its founder, and a local fair housing agency is one of the largest obtained in this region and sends a signal to local governments who have sought to prevent these types of homes from operating in residential neighborhoods.

"This settlement is a victory not just for the Amber Reineck House, but for Michigan women who struggle with substance use disorder. 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 use disorder aren't criminals, and they 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," said Courtney Atsalakis, who launched The Amber Reineck House following her sister Amber's overdose-related death on Christmas Eve 2015.

The Amber Reineck House was launched to provide sober living for women in recovery in the Livingston County region, where no resource of that kind existed. But neighbors opposed the home, and the City of Howell imposed a moratorium—an outright ban—on new sober living and other group homes, for a period of 20 months, until March 2020. After the ban was lifted, ARH was able to open at a different location, where it has become an integral part of the community.

Amber Reineck House vs. City of Howell alleged that this type of differential treatment of housing for people with disabilities is plainly prohibited by federal and state antidiscrimination laws, and that the City was intentionally discriminating by giving force to opposition from neighbors.

"Unfortunately, discrimination against people in group homes, particularly those struggling with substance use disorder or with other disabilities, is painfully common," said Pam Kisch, of the Fair Housing Center for Southeast & Mid Michigan, who joined the case as a plaintiff after working with ARH during the moratorium to provide counseling and educate municipal employees in the region about legal protections for people with disabilities.

Earlier this year, the Village of Hinsdale, Illinois agreed to pay \$800,000 for housing discrimination against a sober living facility in its neighborhood, in a [similar case](#) brought by the U.S. Department of Justice.

“This victory sends a clear message that municipal discrimination against people in recovery will have consequences,” said Lila Miller. “And after 3.5 years of litigation and the case poised for trial, those consequences are clear: Howell will pay three-quarters of a million dollars to resolve the claims against it.”

The case was filed in Detroit, in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan (case number 5:20-cv-10203) by Relman Colfax, PLLC; Dane Law, LLC; and Pitt McGehee Palmer Bonani & Rivers.

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