

## **PRESS RELEASE**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
November 2, 2006

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### **Fair Housing Advocates Seek to Halt Discriminatory Zoning Rule** *St. Bernard Parish "Blood Relative Ordinance" Called Illegal*

NEW ORLEANS, La. – Fair housing advocates, joined by a local property owner, today asked a federal court to enjoin St. Bernard Parish from enforcing a September ordinance barring single-family homeowners from renting to anyone except blood relatives without the special permission of the Parish Council. The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center (GNOFHAC) and the owner, Wallace Rodrigue, are plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the Parish alleging that the ordinance disproportionately excludes minority families seeking housing, and perpetuates the parish's history as a segregated, predominantly white community. Representing the plaintiffs are the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, a national civil rights organization, and the law firm Relman & Associates.

Today's filing asks the court to suspend the discriminatory ordinance and preserve the pre-hurricane status quo, which allowed the rental of single family homes. The suit alleges that the blood-relative ordinance restricts single-family home owners like Mr. Rodrigue from repairing and providing rental housing that is urgently needed in the wake of the storm – and disproportionately needed by minorities. Minorities in St. Bernard Parish have a far greater need for rental housing than whites. According to 2000 census data, 45% of African Americans rely on rental housing whereas only 21% of whites reside in rental units. At the same time, the blood relative ordinance would effectively limit rentals to whites only, since whites own virtually all single-family homes in the parish (93% according to 2000 census data).

The fair housing complaint also points to statements from the Parish showing the discriminatory intent behind the ordinance. For example, Councilman Taffaro noted that the Council's intent was "to maintain the demographics," while Council Chair Dean conceded that the ordinance was passed to "block the blacks from living in these areas." Further, the plaintiffs cite a recent history of actions by the Parish to prevent minorities from residing in the parish, such as the Council's decisions systematically denying permits to owners seeking to lease units in Village Square, a predominantly non-white neighborhood, while allowing rental in other areas.

Based on these factors, the suit claims that St. Bernard passed the ordinance to intentionally exclude them. The federal Fair Housing Act prohibits intentional discrimination that "makes unavailable" any housing, as well as government actions which have a disparate effect on minorities.

"Given the history and the effect of this ordinance, the facts are clear: St. Bernard is trying to keep out Blacks and Hispanics," said Joseph D. Rich, Director of the Fair Housing and Community Development Project at the Lawyers' Committee. In explaining the need for an

injunction, Rich added, “There is a pervasive and immediate need for housing, particularly among minorities, that demands this kind of discrimination be struck down quickly and decisively.”

John P. Relman, a nationally-recognized Washington D.C. civil rights lawyer, noted, “St. Bernard’s blood relation ordinance perpetuates segregation by pulling up the drawbridge to stop people of color from entering the Parish. It is wrong and illegal.”

In addition to denying rental housing to families in need of them, the complaint also alleges that it harms owners who would otherwise be able to rent out their homes. One of the plaintiffs, Mr. Rodrigue, is a lifelong resident of St. Bernard Parish who owns several single-family residences there. Before Hurricane Katrina, he and his wife lived in one of the residences and they were preparing to renovate and rent two others. After the hurricane, they still desired to rehabilitate and rent their single-family properties, however, they have been prevented from doing so by the blood-relative ordinance. Because the Rodrigues do not have blood relatives who are available to live in their single-family residences, these properties will remain empty despite the severe shortage of housing caused by the hurricane. Further, without the prospects of rents, the Rodrigues cannot afford to rehabilitate these properties at a time when the need for rental housing reconstruction is great.