

## Section 8 lawsuit shakes up Palmdale, Lancaster

**Brittney M. Walker** | June 9, 2011

LANCASTER, Calif.—It's official. The cities of Lancaster and Palmdale are being sued by community members and Section 8 residents for alleged discrimination against Blacks and Latinos in public housing.

According to the complaint filed Tuesday by the Community Action League and the NAACP, as well as two private members of the community, the cities named have discriminated against Section 8 families by implementing policies that directly affect the living quality of Blacks and Latinos.

"Lancaster and Palmdale have taken a number of ongoing steps to operate together in furtherance of their unlawful exclusion of and discrimination against Section 8 participants," the complaint reads.

The plaintiffs site persistent "surveillance and investigative activity" against named types of residents, creating an atmosphere in which many feel unwelcome in the Valley, and "discriminatory use of business license and inspection ordinances for rental properties," among other issues.

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**-Maria Palomares**

*Neighborhood Legal Services*

"The goal is to ensure that Section 8 tenants in Lancaster and Palmdale are treated fairly," said V. Jesse Smith, representing both TCAL and the NAACP. "We are going to serve as a mouthpiece for those who have been unfortunately intimidated by the city.... I think the (lawsuit) raises the sense of confidence for residents. This is an opportunity to stand up ... and speak with one voice."

Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford said he had heard the grumblings but had never been shown the facts.

"I'm not sure if this (lawsuit) applies to my city," he said. "We do support compliance checks and playing by the rules is a common expectation. We are one of the few areas in the nation that does it, but it doesn't mean it's not right."

Ledford said he has listened to the voices of the grippers, but no one has ever presented specifics. They've all been "generalizations," the mayor said.

Maria Palomares of the Neighborhood Legal Service, which is among the several firms associated with the claim, retorted there is “plenty of evidence” stacked against both cities.

“There is no request for damages. What we are asking for is that the policies and practices stop,” the attorney said, explaining that the group is asking that both cities revamp their policies and become an all-inclusive community by integrating Section 8 residents that reflect the larger population of recipients and landlords in their decision making.

“We would say that pushing Blacks and Latinos out of the community is the basis of their intentional discrimination,” said Palomares. “They are using different policies and procedures, including the implementation of truancy of children.”

She also said that there are at least six other counties that are experiencing similar discrimination issues. The lawsuit, Smith and Palomares agree, will set the trend and empower public housing communities all over the nation and possibly the world.

The Lancaster Neighborhood Vitalization Commission as well as Mayor R. Rex Parris have been accused of pursuing an agenda of eradicating Section 8 completely from the area.

The complaint cites the words of the mayor in a June 2008 City council meeting, stating: “This city wants to limit the number of Section 8 units that are placed in this community.... It is a problem that is crushing the community and it is time to go to war.”

Further, the complaint states that the city has treated the elderly and those with disabilities as individuals who are “deserving” of Section 8 housing.

Section 8 is a federal housing program designed to give financially struggling, disabled, and elderly individuals the opportunity to live in their own home or apartment.

According to Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles, as of May this year, 70 percent of Palmdale’s Section 8 residents are African American, while 18 percent are Hispanic or Latino. In Lancaster, 72 percent are African American and 14 percent are Hispanic or Latino.

The city of Lancaster would not comment on the lawsuit.