



Suit says cities try to oust minorities

Dakota Smith | June 7, 2011

The cities of Lancaster and Palmdale are waging a discriminatory war against black and Latino residents on public housing assistance, using police intimidation and other tactics to force them out, a new lawsuit alleges.

The federal suit filed by two residents and civil rights groups alleges Latino and black residents using Section 8 vouchers for rental assistance face unannounced searches by sheriff deputies, increased surveillance by county housing agents and organized spying from their neighbors.

By contrast, white individuals who use the vouchers, a group largely consisting of the elderly and disabled, aren't subject to intimidation, according to the suit.

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-Neal S. Dudovitz
Neighborhood Legal Services

The lawsuit was filed by two unidentified women who live in Lancaster and Palmdale; the Community Action League, a low-income advocacy group in the Antelope Valley; and the state branch of the NAACP.

Lancaster Mayor R. Rex Parris has been a consistent and vocal critic of Section 8 vouchers, claiming the affordable housing program is "a dumping ground" for bringing low-income residents to his Antelope Valley city.

In fact, Parris agreed with many statements in the lawsuit, including the assessment that he is "waging a war" against the Section 8 program, a quote that comes from one of the many Lancaster City Council meetings referenced in the suit.

But he railed against the "inflammatory language" of the suit and denied that Lancaster was specifically targeting Latino and black Section 8 users.

"I don't care what the race is," said Parris, saying the suit was filed by "poverty pimps that are looking for attention."

Under Section 8, which is intended to help low-income families, renters pay between 30 and 40 percent of their monthly income on housing.

The program is difficult to obtain, and currently has a 10-year waiting list for applicants in Los Angeles, who undergo an extensive background check. Once a resident's Section 8 housing is terminated, they can't re-apply.

In Lancaster and Palmdale, 3,499 families use Section 8 vouchers. Throughout Los Angeles County, approximately 20,295 families are helped by Section 8 grants, which is administered through the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles (HACoLA).

Jennifer K. del Castillo, staff attorney at Public Counsel, which represents the plaintiffs, said there's a "slightly higher" percentage of residents using Section 8 vouchers in Lancaster and Palmdale than in other cities.

The lawsuit alleges that Lancaster and Palmdale see a pattern of deputies searching homes of Section 8 renters, suggesting officials are looking for excuses to yank them from the program.

Lancaster hired extra personnel from HACoLA to inspect Section 8 violators. To discourage voucher residents from moving to the area, the cities asked HACoLA to create an ad campaign to falsely suggest that there were no jobs in the area, and to exaggerate the cost of living in Lancaster and Palmdale, according to the lawsuit.

The suit also alleges that Lancaster encouraged residents to spy on neighbors and report section 8 violations through a program called the "Good Neighbor Guide." Parris is quoted from a City Council meeting asking how the city can "make it easy for neighbors to file nuisance lawsuits with the assistance of the city...against Section 8 housing."

Parris defended his criticisms of the program, which he believes "moves the urban poor to the hardworking suburbs," as well as the statements quoted in the suit. "I am allowed to say that," he said. "I am the mayor."

Palmdale Mayor James Ledford didn't return a phone call. HACoLA spokeswoman Elisa E. V squez declined comment on the lawsuit.