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After Repeated Accommodation Denials and Elevator Outages, Quadriplegic Woman's Estate to Receive \$100K+ in Fair Housing Settlement

Settlement requires apartment management company to take a range of proactive steps to ensure equal access to housing for people with disabilities

SACRAMENTO – The California Civil Rights Department (CRD) today announced a settlement with the owners and operators of Sutter Village, a federally-funded apartment complex with over 70 units primarily serving elderly and disabled residents in Sutter County. The settlement requires the apartment management company to take a range of proactive steps to ensure equal access to housing for people with disabilities at over 200 properties across California.

“Nobody should ever be trapped in their home because of repeated accommodation denials and maintenance failures,” **said CRD Director Kevin Kish**. “Plain and simple: That is a form of disability discrimination. It does not have to be intentional to cause harm. I am grateful for the courage of people like Ms. Willis who come forward and speak out — not just for themselves, but also for the people around them. This settlement will help make a lasting difference for elderly and disabled tenants across California.”

Trapped and Ignored

In 2022, CRD sued the owners and managers of Sutter Village after receiving and investigating a civil rights complaint filed by Katy Willis, a quadriplegic tenant who later passed away in 2023. The state's lawsuit sought to directly address the alleged prolonged failure by management to accommodate Ms. Willis' requests to be moved into a first-floor unit from the third floor and make the apartment building safe and accessible for tenants with disabilities. According to the lawsuit, Ms. Willis — who used a wheelchair — faced years of unnecessary hardship as a result of repeated elevator outages that left her stuck on the third floor.

From missed medical appointments and physical therapy to skipped support group meetings and church, the lack of accessibility features directly impacted Ms. Willis' ability to live independently and in her community. Under state and federal fair housing laws, property owners must accommodate individuals with disabilities. In addition, under federal law, housing providers that receive federal financial assistance are generally required to make and pay for reasonable modifications to ensure people with disabilities are able to enjoy equal access to their apartments and building common areas.

Tenant's Fight Leads to Change

After years of requesting reasonable accommodations, filing a civil rights complaint, and even publicly speaking out to the media about the living conditions at Sutter Village, Ms. Willis was finally moved to a ground floor unit with the necessary accessibility features. While she passed away after the filing of the lawsuit, the settlement announced today because of her civil rights complaint will help ensure the rights of future residents are protected. Under the terms of the agreement, the owners of Sutter Village will:

- Review and update as necessary their fair housing policies, with a specific focus on reasonable accommodations.
- Train staff on state antidiscrimination protections and how to process reasonable accommodation requests.
- Adopt policies to ensure regular maintenance of elevators at all properties.
- Develop and implement an emergency evacuation plan at Sutter Village to ensure people with disabilities are supported.
- Develop and implement a policy for any extended elevator outages to ensure housing remains accessible for people with disabilities.
- Pay \$120,000 in compensation and legal costs, including \$105,000 in damages to the estate of Ms. Willis.

Disability Rights Are Human Rights

CRD remains committed to combatting disability discrimination in California wherever it occurs. Last year, the department [expanded its "Civil Rights 101" webinar series](#) to include new sessions focused on disability discrimination. The department also helped reach a [\\$230,000 mediated settlement](#) for a former social work student over the alleged denial of a mental health accommodation for an internship program. In early 2024, CRD announced a [\\$110,000 mediated settlement](#) with five Southern California assisted living facilities over alleged failures to provide American Sign Language interpretation for seniors with disabilities. In 2023, the department [secured a \\$375,000 settlement](#) with a local government over allegations of an employee being unlawfully reprimanded and denied reasonable accommodations and work opportunities as a result of a request for a disability accommodation.

If you or someone you know has been the victim of disability discrimination, CRD may be able to assist you through its [complaint process](#). The department also [provides general information and factsheets online](#) about civil rights protections for members of the public, including with respect to [housing discrimination against people with disabilities](#).

The settlement announced today was supported by Associate Chief Counsel Azadeh Hosseinian, Staff Counsel Cecilia Aguilera, Legal Investigator Maria Mercado, and Assistant Chief Counsel Nadia Aziz.

A copy of the settlement is available [here](#). A copy of the lawsuit filed in 2022 is available [here](#).

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The California Civil Rights Department (CRD) is the state agency charged with enforcing California's civil rights laws. CRD's mission is to protect the people of California from unlawful discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and state-funded programs and activities, and from hate violence and human trafficking. For more information, visit calcivilrights.ca.gov.

