



Chicago Woman Access to Homeless Shelter Because She Was Gay

By GayWebMonkey.com

Chicago, IL - A Chicago woman denied access to a city-funded homeless shelter on a cold November evening because she is a lesbian is challenging the discrimination she experienced. The American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois recently announced the filing of complaints with the City of Chicago Commission on Human Relations and the State of Illinois Department of Human Rights on behalf of Michelle Wang, a 27-year-old woman denied space at New Life Shelter after she told a staffer at the shelter she is a lesbian. Only intervention by a concerned Chicago city employee prevented Wang from spending another night on the streets.

"I am disturbed that I was denied shelter, left to the cold and the danger because of something so trivial," Wang told the Chicago Tribune recently.

John A. Knight, director of the ACLU of Illinois Lesbian and Gay Rights Project added, "This is the type of blatant discrimination that too often goes unreported and unchallenged. It is only because Michelle is being so courageous that we are able to make this challenge. Too often, vulnerable people are too occupied with meeting their immediate needs to exercise their rights."

The events leading to the complaint took place on Nov. 1, 2006. Wang had moved to Chicago earlier in the year with her girlfriend. Within a few months, the relationship was strained and ultimately ended. At the time of the break up, Wang had been working at a new job for a few weeks, and continues to be employed by the same retail chain to the present. Though she worked full time, Wang found herself in a new city, with no friends, no savings and no way to secure housing. A co-worker permitted her to stay in his home for several weeks. After that, Wang stayed with others from time to time, and began spending nights on the streets of Chicago.

In late October, concerned co-workers urged Wang to find more permanent housing. On Oct. 31, with temperatures near freezing, a co-worker drove Wang to the City of Chicago Department of Human Services. An employee at the DHS spoke with a number of shelters looking for space and found none. She asked Wang to return the following day. Wang stayed in an unheated building that night, and returned to the DHS offices the first thing in the morning. Again, the DHS employee called another shelter before confirming that the New Life Shelter, operated with city funding, had beds available. The New Life staff person asked to speak with Wang, and inquired about the reason she was homeless. Wang replied that she and her girlfriend had split up and that she had been asked to leave the apartment. The staff person became agitated, suggesting that she did not understand why Wang left the apartment if her name was on the lease.

Wang finally responded that the other woman was her lesbian partner, and they had a romantic break up. The New Life staffer put Wang on hold, and returned to say that there were no beds available. The City DHS employee asked a colleague to phone the shelter and check on the availability of beds and that employee found that New Life indeed had space available.

"The complaint also underscores the importance of strong, anti-discrimination laws in Chicago and Illinois, for we know that in more than 30 states across the nation this type of discrimination can go unchallenged, because it is not illegal," added Knight.

States that protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation include California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, Maryland, Nevada New Hampshire and Wisconsin. The state legislatures in Oregon and Iowa recently passed anti-discrimination laws covering sexual orientation and gender identity, but these laws haven't gone into effect yet.