

OAG Settlement: Black Woman Had Lease Revoked, Was Subjected to Harassment, Due to Race

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE — Wednesday, August 2, 2023

HARRISBURG – The Office of Attorney General announced action against a Shippensburg landlord and his affiliates for allegedly discriminating against a Black family, attempting to block their move-in, and harassing them at the property.

The Office of Attorney General reached a \$90,000 settlement before the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) against landlords John Timothy Gruver and Bonnie Gruver, their son and daughter-in-law Robert and Kelly Gruver, and Ridgway Real Estate.

In addition to paying \$90,000, the Gruvers and Ridgway Real Estate are required to receive fair housing training provided by the PHRC and abide by new fair housing policies.

The complainant contacted the Office of Attorney General in May 2020, during the early months of the pandemic shutdown, alleging that the landlords discriminated against her and her grandchildren by revoking their lease shortly before the move-in date due to her race and concerns that one of her grandchildren had been in trouble with the law. The complainant said she tried to explain that that grandchild would not be living with her, but the landlord would not listen.

Believing she still had a legally valid lease, she went to the property on her move-in date. The real estate agent had placed a “No Trespassing” sign on the door, naming her by name. In addition, the landlords’ son and daughter-in-law, Robert and Kelly Gruver, who lived next door, confronted the complainant and allegedly racially harassed her and used a slur.

The Office of Attorney General’s Civil Rights Enforcement Section filed complaints with the PHRC. The Office contended John and Bonnie Gruver’s revocation of the lease violated the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act’s (PHRA) prohibition against racial discrimination in housing by intent and/or unjustified disparate impact. The Office also contended that Ridgway Real Estate aided and abetted the PHRA violation because its agent knew or should have known that the landlords’ reasons for voiding the complainant’s valid lease were racially discriminatory, yet the agent took actions to facilitate and enforce the decision rather than oppose it. Finally, the Office contended that Robert and Kelly Gruver subjected the complainant to racial harassment that violated the PHRA.

The PHRC found probable cause to credit the Office of Attorney General’s allegations. After conciliation talks initially failed, the PHRC’s staff counsel joined the Office of Attorney General as a co-litigant to present the case at a Commission hearing, as permitted by the statute. The

parties then conciliated the matter successfully prior to a hearing, and on July 24, 2023, the Commission approved the conciliation agreement and entered it as a Final Order.