

NORTHWEST FAIR HOUSING ALLIANCE AND CATHOLIC FAMILY AND CHILD SERVICES VOLUNTEER CHORE SERVICES PARTNER TO PROVIDE RAMPS TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Representatives from Northwest Fair Housing Alliance (NWFHA) and Volunteer Chore Services (VCS), a program of Catholic Family and Child Services (CFCS), will meet in Pasco on Monday, November 23rd to examine a wheelchair ramp recently built by VCS volunteers. The reason for the occasion is that a \$4,000 check will be presented to VCS by NWFHA. The funds will be used to construct at least five similar wheelchair ramps for low income seniors or younger adults with disabilities. The money was part of a discrimination settlement received by NWFHA, and the funds were intended to go to an organization that helps to provide accessibility for people with disabilities. VCS has a long history of building ramps and making other modifications that help low income clients remain living independently in their own homes. The cost is kept low because all labor is provided by a dedicated group of volunteers. Also present at the event will be VCS volunteer Frank Wentz who is one of the leaders of the ramp building crew. The volunteers report that clients are very appreciative because the ramps represent freedom and access to the outside world.

“This is a wonderful partnership,” said Marley Eichstaedt, Executive Director of NWFHA. “The NWFHA Board and staff were impressed by the work of VCS on behalf of people with disabilities. We believe that VCS’s use of volunteer labor in building ramps will maximize the benefit of these funds for the intended recipients, people with disabilities.”

The mission of the NWFHA is to eliminate housing discrimination and to ensure equal housing opportunity for the people of Washington through education, counseling and advocacy. As part of its mission, NWFHA conducts on-site audits of multi-family housing complexes to determine compliance with the federal Fair Housing Act’s (FHA) accessibility requirements. The FHA requires that multi-family housing intended for first occupancy after March 1991 comply with 7 accessibility criteria: (1) accessible building entrance on an accessible route; (2) accessible and usable public and common use areas; (3) usable doors; (4) accessible route into and through the covered unit; (5) environmental controls in accessible locations; (6) reinforced walls for grab bars; and (7) usable kitchens and bathrooms.

NWFHA conducted an on-site accessibility test at a multi-family apartment complex in Pasco in May 2005. The subject property has fourteen buildings containing a total of 252 dwelling units. The 84 ground floor units are covered units subject to the design and construction requirements of the FHA. During the first test, several minor and major violations of the Fair Housing Act design and construction requirements were revealed. Barriers included stairs that led to ground floor units and walkway ramps with higher than allowed slopes. A second test in July 2005 confirmed these violations. Thereafter, NWFHA filed an administrative complaint on December 29, 2005, with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) alleging that the owner of the multi-family apartment complex, as well as its architects and civil engineer, violated Section 804(f)(3)(C) of the FHA on the basis of handicap by designing and constructing apartments not in full compliance with the accessibility requirements of the FHA.

Respondents denied having discriminated, but agreed to settle the FHA claims by entering into a Conciliation Agreement. As part of this agreement, Respondents agreed to pay \$18,000.00 to NWFHA, compensation which is separate from amounts to be spent by Respondent on agreed upon retrofitting of the property. \$4,000.00 of the \$18,000 was requested by NWFHA for property modifications for people with disabilities at other properties, as mitigation for individuals with disabilities who were unable to access the subject property.