



Tenants claim harassment

By Benny Polacca

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The North Dakota Department of Labor's Human Rights Division has determined that a former Fargo landlord committed housing discrimination after at least three female tenants claimed he sexually harassed them during their tenancy.

Now the complainants want to take the matter to state district court.

Accusations made against Lowell Siebels of Harwood, N.D., include: unwelcome advances and groping, lewd comments and propositions for sex in lieu of rent, according to copies of the complaints The Forum received through a public records request.

Carolyn Siebels, the properties' co-owner and wife of Siebels, was also named in the complaints filed last summer with the Department of Labor.

The Human Rights Division made its determinations March 22 that the two complaints were valid. One was filed by Fair Housing of the Dakotas, an advocacy group addressing housing discrimination.

The other complaint was filed by a former tenant.

The Forum typically does not identify victims of sex crimes and these matters have yet to go to court.

Included in the complaints:

E After taking a shower, one tenant claimed Siebels was waiting for her when she came out of the bathroom. She wrote that Siebels said he was hoping "to see a show." She ended up staying in the bathroom for two hours until he left.

E Another tenant, who was behind on rent, wrote she went on what she thought was a hunting trip with Siebels in November 2005. They drove to a house he owned in Lidgerwood, N.D., 75 miles south of Fargo.

While there, Siebels took a mattress down from the truck and into the house, where he allegedly propositioned her.

"I was a far away from home and felt if I did not go through with it he'd leave me there to walk home or evict me," she wrote. She then wrote she had sex with Siebels because she needed to keep her housing in order to see her children.

"We've issued a denial of the allegations," the Siebels' attorney, Barton Cahill, said of the Human Rights Division's determinations.

The Human Rights Division is responsible for enforcing the North Dakota Housing Discrimination Act. Employees include investigators who examine the complaints and interview both parties.

In its investigation, the Human Rights Division did not find the Siebels' denial response credible because the tenant described his Lidgerwood house in detail that would have to be observed in person, the determination said.

Cahill said the Siebels are out of the rental business. He said they have sold all of their rental properties except one, which they are trying to sell.

Fargo properties owned by the Siebels, according to the complaints, included 623 9th Ave. S., 730 11th St. N., 1412 3rd Ave. N., 1413 3rd Ave. N., 203 12th St. S. and 510 4th St. N.

Cahill said he was contacted Wednesday by the state attorney general's office, which informed him that the complainants want to take Siebels to the state's district court. Papers could be filed by month's end, he said.

The state attorney general's office is responsible for filing claims on behalf of housing discrimination complainants in district court and represents the Department of Labor.

A call to the state attorney general's office seeking comment was not returned Thursday.

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