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## **LOCAL TEACHER FILES LAWSUIT ALLEGING LANDLORD RETALIATED AGAINST HER FOR PUBLIC PROTEST OF \$1,100 RENT INCREASE**

### **Tenant Fights Back Despite Climate of Fear Fueled by Housing Crisis**

**San Mateo, CA** –A local middle-school teacher has filed suit against her landlord alleging that he retaliated against her because she participated in the San Francisco Peninsula’s growing movement for tenants’ rights. The complaint alleges that the Plaintiff, Barbara O’Neil, was targeted by her landlord shortly after speaking to the media and her elected officials about a massive rent increase. Ms. O’Neil is represented by Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto, the law firm of Kaye Scholer LLP, and the Western Center on Law and Poverty.

“It’s not easy to speak up as a tenant given the current housing crisis, “ said Plaintiff Barbara O’Neil. “Fear is pervasive. There’s nowhere to go if your landlord evicts you, so tenants are forced to put up with abusive landlords rather than risk homelessness. We must put a stop to the bullying. Tenants cannot let our voices be silenced by threats from out of control landlords.”

Faced with a \$1,100 rent hike, Ms. O’Neil joined a multi-racial coalition of residents advocating for stronger tenant protections in San Mateo. She was featured in a front-page article in a local newspaper and also provided public comments at several City Council meetings. Ms. O’Neil decried the nearly 63% rent increase and urged her elected officials to protect working families from the waves of unreasonable rent increases and arbitrary evictions sweeping across the Peninsula.

The lawsuit alleges that only four days after Ms. O’Neil spoke at a City Council meeting, her landlord began to threaten her tenancy for living with two pet cats, despite the fact that the landlord had given her express permission to keep pet cats when she moved in almost eleven years prior.

The landlord’s sudden threats constitute illegal retaliation for the exercise of Ms. O’Neil’s First Amendment rights, according to the complaint.

“This case illustrates how some landlords are too willing to exploit the housing crisis to destabilize our communities,” said Daniel Saver, an attorney at Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto. “Although currently it is lawful in San Mateo for landlords to impose unconscionable rent increases on their tenants, it is illegal for landlords to retaliate against tenants who speak out against such egregious rent gouging. We must

send a clear message that retaliation against tenant organizers will not be tolerated in San Mateo County.”

The lawsuit, filed in San Mateo County Superior Court, seeks an order enjoining the landlord from further retaliation and monetary damages.

A complete copy of lawsuit is at [https://www.clsepa.org/oneil\\_lawsuit](https://www.clsepa.org/oneil_lawsuit). Attorneys and plaintiffs are available for interviews by calling the press contacts above.

*Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto provides legal assistance to low-income individuals and families in East Palo Alto and the surrounding community, with a focus on housing, immigration, and predatory consumer practices. Goldstein, Borgen, Dardarian & Ho (GBDH), is one of the oldest and most successful public interest law firms in the country, representing plaintiffs in complex and class action lawsuits in the areas of employment discrimination, wage and hour, disability access, voting rights, environmental justice, and consumer rights.*