

# **Legal Aid of North Carolina, Inc.**

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*Serving low-income clients in all 100 counties of North Carolina*

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### **For Immediate Release**

## **Restraining order sought for victims of sexual extortion in federal housing subsidy program**

**LAURINBURG, July 1, 2014** – Legal Aid of North Carolina’s Fair Housing Project and Greensboro attorney Craig Hensel are asking a U.S. district court to prevent a nonprofit housing group from retaliating against eight women who say the group’s employees extorted sex in exchange for facilitating their participation in a federal housing subsidy program.

Legal Aid and Hensel filed a motion for a temporary restraining order against the group, Four-County Community Services (FCCS), and two of its employees, John Wesley and Eric Pender, yesterday in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina.

FCCS receives funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to manage the Section 8 housing subsidy program for low-income renters in Bladen, Brunswick, Columbus, Hoke, Pender, Robeson and Scotland counties. The group, which has offices in Laurinburg and Lumberton, changed its name to Southeastern Community and Family Services on June 27.

Defendant John Wesley is responsible for deciding who receives the Section 8 vouchers issued by FCCS, which help low-income renters find housing from private landlords. Defendant Eric Pender conducts inspections of participants’ homes for FCCS to ensure they meet a set of requirements.

The women say that from 2011 to 2013, Wesley and Pender demanded sexual favors in exchange for granting the vouchers and conducting favorable home inspections, visited the women’s homes to solicit sex, made sexually suggestive phone calls, exposed themselves, and touched the women sexually without their consent.

“By demanding sex in exchange for allowing these women to participate in the Section 8 program,” Hensel said, “Wesley and Pender established a system of sexual quid pro quo that essentially forced their victims, who have few options when it comes to housing, to decide between homelessness and sexual humiliation. That’s not just disgusting, it’s illegal.”

The women first brought charges against FCCS in state superior court in September 2012. Since then, the group has sought to terminate the Section 8 voucher of one of the women, Khristen Sellers, alleging that her home did not pass inspection, even though it always did when the harassment was occurring.



“This is clear-cut retaliation,” said Kelly Clarke, an attorney with Legal Aid’s Fair Housing Project. “They’re targeting Khristen to scare the other women into keeping quiet. We’re asking the court for a restraining order to protect these women, and any witnesses that might come forward, from retaliation for speaking out against sexual abuse.”

Attorneys for the women are asking the court to force FCCS to issue Sellers a new Section 8 voucher and give her sufficient time to find a new home, prevent FCCS and its employees from communicating with the women except through counsel, and prevent the group from adversely affecting the women’s vouchers without prior approval from the court.

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*Legal Aid of North Carolina is a statewide, nonprofit law firm that provides free legal services in civil matters to low-income people in order to ensure equal access to justice and remove legal barriers to economic opportunity. Legal Aid’s Fair Housing Project works to eliminate housing discrimination and to ensure equal housing opportunity for all people in North Carolina through education, outreach, public policy initiatives, advocacy and enforcement. To learn more, visit [www.legalaidnc.org](http://www.legalaidnc.org) and [www.fairhousingnc.org](http://www.fairhousingnc.org).*

*Craig Hensel is an attorney with Hensel Law PLLC in Greensboro, which deals primarily in employment discrimination, contract, and civil litigation matters. Learn more at [www.hensellaw.com](http://www.hensellaw.com).*

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