

# Chicago Tribune

## Lesbian alleges shelter left her out in the cold

Pastor denies any discrimination

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By Matt O'Connor

Tribune staff reporter

The staffer for the homeless shelter didn't seem to understand Michelle Wang's explanation why she needed a place to stay. Wang offered again over the telephone how she had broken up with her girlfriend and moved out of the apartment they shared. The staffer appeared to become agitated, raised her voice and continued to profess confusion, Wang said.

Finally, Wang blurted out that she was a lesbian. The staffer immediately put her on hold. After a long wait, Wang got the word she feared: There were no beds available. She would have to fend for herself for another night in the unseasonably cold fall weather. In complaints with city and state officials and in an expected lawsuit, the 27-year-old Wang alleges New Life Interim Housing, a homeless shelter in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood, discriminated against her on the basis of sexual orientation.

A short time after Wang had been rebuffed by the shelter, the city's Department of Human Services learned from New Life that it still had two beds available that day, according to John Knight, an attorney for the ACLU of Illinois, which is representing Wang.

"I am disturbed that I was denied shelter, left to the cold and the danger because of something so trivial," Wang, now living in a Humboldt Park apartment, said of the Nov. 1 incident.

Rev. Bud Ogle, a Presbyterian pastor who co-founded the Christian ministry that runs the New Life shelter in the North Howard Street area, was apologetic for Wang's troubles but said he believes an inadvertent clerical error was at fault and not any intentional discrimination.

Ogle, who described himself as a lifelong ACLU member, said the shelter's program manager had committed the last two beds to a family but failed to note that in a bed-count record. Relying on that record, another staffer thought the two beds were still available--until the manager alerted her otherwise in the midst of the interview of Wang. A short time later, the city was incorrectly told there were two beds open by a staffer still relying on the inaccurate bed count record, Ogle said.

But Ogle conceded he was relying on the word of the staffers and didn't know for sure what happened.

"Some of our staff are less comfortable with homosexual, gay and lesbian folks than others are," he said in an interview Friday outside his Good News Partners Ministry office at 1600 W. Jonquil Terrace. "Our policy as a ministry is to welcome every single person as a child of God."

**A recent report found an epidemic homeless problem among young lesbians and gays and cited incidents of anti-homosexual harassment at homeless shelters around the country. The study--issued in January by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless--said one Michigan facility required that gay and lesbian youths wear orange jumpsuits to set them apart from others. Many lesbians and gays conceal**

**their sexual orientation from homeless shelters to avoid "potential misunderstanding, abuse and rejection," the study said.**

Wang moved here from Indianapolis last May after her girlfriend was transferred by work. The relationship soured quickly, and Wang moved out in July. Wang had just found a part-time retail job but had no savings--and no friends or relatives in the area.

For a number of weeks, Wang lived with a co-worker's family. But by October, she gave up her three birds and four rabbits and bounced around the homes of other co-workers and friends. On many nights, she ended up sleeping outdoors in plunging temperatures.

She wore as many as three pairs of pants at a time but frequently awoke fearful of losing fingers and toes to frostbite. "I really thought I could be found in a frozen ice block," she said.

She decided to seek out a shelter when she was nearly fired after missing two days of work because of poor sleep. The New Life staffer appeared confused over how Wang became homelessness, but Wang said she sensed the staffer understood perfectly but wanted a sanitized version of events. Instead, Wang dropped the "I"-word.

"As much as I wanted a place to sleep, I didn't want to lie," Wang said.

After promptly being put on hold, Wang said she told the city caseworker, "I think I just lost my spot in the shelter." The caseworker, who was present during the call, declined to comment for this story.

Soon afterward, a city worker who checks daily the count at shelters was told by New Life that it had two beds open for single women, according to the ACLU's Knight.

The ACLU filed discrimination complaints with the city Commission on Human Relations and the Illinois Department of Human Rights. And a lawsuit could be filed in Circuit Court as soon as this week, Knight said.

"It's a case that's of interest to us because it's such an egregious harm, and we think that discrimination against lesbian and gay people happens commonly," Knight said.

The city said the incident has prompted plans for a mandatory training session on sexual orientation discrimination for shelters funded with tax money. The New Life shelter, which has 30 beds for women and children, receives \$150,000 each year in funding from the city.