

## Shelter won't face suit over lesbian's bias claim

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A Chicago woman who said she was denied access to a homeless shelter because she is a lesbian said Wednesday that she will not file a lawsuit after the Rogers Park shelter agreed to employee training and other steps to ensure its facilities do not discriminate against gay, lesbian and transgendered people.

"I think this training will be done wholeheartedly, and it's going to be awesome," said Michelle Wang, who filed charges of discrimination in April saying that she was denied shelter at New Life Interim Housing because of her sexual orientation.

The city's Department of Human Services learned soon after that the shelter had two beds available that day, said John Knight, an attorney for the ACLU of Illinois, which is representing Wang.

About 50 staffers and volunteers at New Life are expected to start the training in August.

According to the ACLU, training material will include information about proper use of terms and pronouns; guidelines for protecting the privacy and dignity of individuals; and preventing harassment, abuse and assault.

As part of the settlement, New Life has agreed to create an internal complaint process to investigate charges of discrimination and respond appropriately.

Wang, 27, will help craft the training by reviewing the agendas and giving input.

"I want to see change, and I don't want to see stuff like that happen again," she said.

Rev. Bud Ogle, a Presbyterian pastor who co-founded the Christian ministry that runs the New Life shelter in the North Howard Street area, has been apologetic about Wang's experience. He has said an inadvertent clerical error may have been at fault and not any intentional discrimination.

"In our 31 years of work to end homelessness, God often teaches us that good things can come out of bad situations," Ogle said in an ACLU news release. "Michelle Wang has helped us realize this again. We continue to oppose any and all discrimination, injustice, fear and prejudice."

As a result of the Wang case, Chicago recently conducted anti-discrimination training for staff at other homeless shelters, said Bill Greaves, the city's liaison to the gay, lesbian and transgendered community.

Wang, who moved from Indianapolis, called New Life on Nov. 1, months after a relationship with her girlfriend ended. Before that, she bounced from homes of other friends and co-workers and often slept outdoors in plunging temperatures, Wang said.

In a phone conversation with a New Life staffer, Wang said she was homeless because she had broken up with her girlfriend and moved out of the apartment they shared. Wang said the staffer sounded confused and agitated. She finally told the staffer that she is a lesbian, Wang said.

Knight said he has received a couple of calls from other gays and lesbians who said they were treated unfairly at homeless shelters in Chicago.

**A report released January by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless found an epidemic homeless problem among young lesbians and gays and cited incidents of anti-homosexual harassment at homeless shelters across the nation. The study found people conceal their sexual orientation to avoid "potential misunderstanding, abuse and rejection," the study said.**

"It's something people sometimes keep secret, but they shouldn't be forced to," Knight said.

After she filed charges, Wang said she particularly reassured when she met with Ogle and the shelter's director, who she said were "appalled and upset" that she was treated in such a way.

"I think that everything happens slowly," Wang said. "I also know that talking to Bud that, at least at their shelter, they have taken a broader look."