The LGBT & HIV Unit at our Brooklyn program recently successfully represented a client whose landlords mounted a campaign of harassment and threats against him when they found out that he was gay and HIV positive.

Our client rented his apartment in 2007 from a married couple who owned a building in Bed-Stuy. Things were fine for years until the summer of 2011, when his landlords somehow learned about his status. At that point, they started harassing, threatening, and trying to evict him. They banged on his apartment door and threw rocks at his windows; yelled threatening statements at him; shut off his heat and hot water; sent him harassing text messages; told neighbors that he had AIDS; and threatened that they would kill or injure him.

Our client was terrified. He was scared to go out of his apartment for fear that he would be harassed or assaulted by his landlords or their friends. He was also devastated by the invasion of his privacy. Almost no one in his life—not even his closest friends and family members—had known that he was gay or that he was HIV positive.

As soon as the harassment started, our client asked Section 8 for permission to transfer to a different apartment. Finally, seven months later, he was able to move to a new, safer apartment in a different neighborhood.

Senior Staff Attorney Sonja Shield filed a lawsuit against our client’s landlords alleging claims for harassment under the New York State and City Human Rights Laws, the New York State Civil Rights Law, and the New York City Housing Maintenance Code, as well as claims for breach of the warranty of habitability, assault, and infliction of emotional distress. The suit was filed under a "John Doe" pseudonym which prohibited our client’s former landlords from disclosing or disseminating his name.

"People think that discrimination against HIV positive and gay people doesn't happen anymore, but it does—even in New York City," said Senior Staff Attorney Sonja Shield. "Brooklyn Legal Services was committed to pursuing this case because this tenant deserved justice, and even small landlords need to know they can’t get away with discrimination."

After extensive negotiations, we are pleased to announce that we have reached a settlement and our client will be receiving $11,000 in compensation for the treatment he suffered.

"I was completely devastated by my situation. I never imagined I'd have an attorney in my corner. GMHC recommended that I come to Brooklyn Legal Services to meet with Sonja Shield. She has been an angel in this case and extremely pleased with this settlement. Brooklyn Legal Services never gave up on me. Sonja went more than out of her way to make sure that I was compensated appropriately so that I could continue with my recovery, and I'm now able to move forward."

"Now my old landlords know they can get away with doing this to people."

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