

LAWSUIT OVER: Framingham agrees to pay SMOC \$1 million

By Danielle Ameden/Daily News staff

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FRAMINGHAM —

The town has agreed to pay the South Middlesex Opportunity Council \$1 million to settle an anti-discrimination lawsuit the social service provider filed in federal court in 2007.

SMOC late this afternoon announced the settlement, which also requires training "relative to the rights of the disabled under federal anti-discrimination laws."

The town's insurance company will pay SMOC the \$1 million, according to the settlement.

The sides met with a mediator earlier this month to work on settling the case out of court, on the advice of federal Judge Douglas P. Woodlock.

SMOC sued the town and certain individual officials and residents, alleging the town tried to block or stall the nonprofit's plans to relocate and expand its Sage House, a home for recovering drug addicts and their families, and to open Larry's Place, a shelter for disabled veterans

"On behalf of the disadvantaged and disabled populations served by our agency, we embrace the agreement in which both parties acknowledge the right of every person in our community to have a place to call home," SMOC Executive Director James T. Cuddy said in a statement. "Making the decision to file the lawsuit in 2007 was extremely difficult, but we were guided by our belief that the disabled population we serve is protected under state and federal law.

"The settlement agreement affirms that federal civil rights law supports the decision we had made over five years ago to go forward with siting housing for veterans with substance abuse and mental health service needs and housing for young families who are committed to living in recovery and moving forward to successful independent living," he added. "This settlement will provide important guidance for the creation of supportive housing for disabled individuals and families. With this settlement, we have now achieved everything we hoped to achieve."

Woodlock signed off on the settlement late this afternoon, closing the case.

The Board of Selectmen issued a statement through Town Manager Julian Suso early this evening, saying the settlement "closes what has been a difficult chapter in our town's history."

"To avoid costly and protracted litigation and trial, the town's insurer made a business decision to make a payment to SMOC of \$1 million," selectmen said.

Since 2007, Town Meeting OK'd spending \$750,000 on the town's legal defense.

Selectmen noted the town avoided one possible outcome scenario of a trial - that a federal judge would begin overseeing the town's future planning and zoning decisions.

"While mediation is not a one-way street and no party is completely satisfied, the Board of Selectmen firmly believes this settlement is in the town's best interests."

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