

For Immediate Release



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Contact:

John Petruszak (708) 957-4674, x22 southsuburban@prodigy.net
South Suburban Housing Center

South Suburban Community Organization Joins Civil Rights Complaint Against Cook County Assessor Joseph Berrios

CHICAGO — Today, the Homewood based South Suburban Housing Center (SSHC), joined two Chicago neighborhood organizations, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council and Logan Square Neighborhood Association, as plaintiffs in a lawsuit against County Assessor Joseph Berrios in the Circuit Court of Cook County. The amended complaint filed today, like the original complaint filed in December 2017, alleges racially and ethnically discriminatory and unfair residential property tax assessment practices that violate the Illinois Civil Rights Act, the Federal Fair Housing Act, the Equal Protection Clauses of the Illinois and United States, and the Uniformity Clause of the Illinois Constitution.

SSHC is the regional fair housing enforcement and housing counseling agency serving the south metropolitan Chicago area since 1975. In recent years, SSHC has experienced increasing demand to counsel and assist homeowners in various majority African American suburban communities it serves where families are in mortgage distress due in part to extremely high property tax bills. It is not uncommon for SSHC clients who are affected to show that they are paying a larger portion of their monthly payment to lenders for their real estate tax escrow, rather than to pay down the principal on their mortgages. SSHC recently received a spike in complaints for assistance when homeowners in these communities received tax reassessments for their 2017 bills with substantial increases based on higher property valuations set by the Assessor's office.

Most south Cook County communities are struggling with the slow recovery of property market values that are still 50% or more below the pre-foreclosure crisis values of 2006. Large percentages of the families SSHC counsels are paying on mortgages that are "underwater," where the principal owed is higher than the market value of the property. "Under these circumstances", SSHC Executive Director, John Petruszak commented, "the County Assessor's office should be looking for ways to stimulate recovery in south Cook County, not economically punishing African American homeowners that have already been hardest hit by the foreclosure deflated market with the additional burden of disproportionately higher property taxes."

The amended complaint filed today alleges that the Assessor's residential property assessments discriminate on the basis of race and ethnicity and are profoundly regressive, over-assessing lower-valued homes in African American and Hispanic communities, and under-assessing higher-valued homes in white areas of Cook County. These allegations are supported by independent statistical analysis of the Assessor's practices performed by the University of Illinois, the University of Chicago, the Chicago Tribune, and the Assessor's own consultant, the Civic Consulting Alliance. SSHC's addition as a plaintiff provides representation to the African American homeowners' in the south Cook County communities it serves. The amended complaint specifically alleges that nearly half the residential properties in the majority African American south suburban communities of Harvey and Park Forest were over assessed by 20% or more above market value from 2011 to 2015 and that in Sauk Village 68% of the properties over this same period were over assessed by this margin.

SSHC is represented by attorney Jeffrey Taren of the Seattle and Chicago based civil right law firm of MacDonald Hoague & Bayless, and joins Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, and their legal team in this action, the Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, Hughes, Socol Piers & Dym and Miner, Barnhill & Galland, to bring about fairness, transparency, and accountability to the Cook County residential property tax assessment system.

[South Suburban Housing Center](#)

SSHC is the private, non-profit, regional fair housing and housing counseling agency primarily serving over 100 communities in southern Cook, Will and Kankakee counties of Illinois since 1975. SSHC's Fair Housing Enforcement Services extend to Grundy and Iroquois Counties in Illinois, Lake County, Indiana, and several central Illinois cities. SSHC's current Fair Housing Enforcement and Housing Counseling programs assist individuals in all protected classes and ensure that housing providers recognize and comply with the fair housing laws.

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