

# South suburban woman who sued housing agency gets a new apartment



Mary Ann Blakemore, who was burnt out of her public housing apartment by a boyfriend of her daughter's, subsequently sent to prison for attempted murder, sued the Housing Authority of Cook County. (Phil Kadner, Daily Southtown)

By **Lolly Bowean**

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**A**fter a nearly yearlong court battle, the Housing Authority of Cook County has provided a new apartment to a Chicago Heights woman who lost her unit when her daughter's boyfriend firebombed her home, destroying the apartment and critically injuring her.

Mary Ann Blakemore was given a new apartment in a south suburban public housing complex and she will also get some financial aid from the Housing Authority to help replace the belongings she lost in the fire.

The agency agreed to retrain its employees on how to recognize tenants with special circumstances and they will have to learn more about laws designed to protect victims of domestic violence and residents with disabilities. They will also undergo more training on the Fair Housing Act, officials said.

"We think that the training element of this settlement is a big victory," said Neha Lall, a senior attorney with

LAF, which was once known as the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago. The group represented Blakemore in court. "Although these laws have been in place for over a decade, housing providers receiving federal funding do not seem to understand what their obligations are."

Blakemore, 56, filed a civil suit last year because her one-bedroom apartment was destroyed and never repaired while she was in the hospital recovering from third-degree burns. When she was released, Blakemore was forced to move in with relatives and said in her lawsuit that housing officials were dragging their feet in getting her a new apartment.

The housing authority had claimed that it offered Blakemore an apartment but that she had turned it down.

The lawsuit was settled last week.

Blakemore is a longtime public housing resident and she was living in the Sunrise Apartments in 2014 when her daughter and two young grandchildren came to her place fleeing a violent boyfriend.

When Branden Strayhorne showed up, Blakemore called the police, but Strayhorne left the apartment complex before officers arrived. According to the Cook County state's attorney's office, once police left the complex, Strayhorne returned, broke a window in Blakemore's unit, poured gasoline inside and set the place on fire.

Strayhorne was sentenced to 26 years in prison for setting the fire, records show.

Blakemore was hospitalized for three months for her injuries and she lost nearly all her personal property in the fire. When she got out of a rehabilitation center, she learned her apartment was gone. And housing officials were not moving quickly to get her a new place, Blakemore said in her suit, which was filed in April 2015.

Housing authority officials would not say how much they agreed to pay Blakemore for her losses but said she has already been leased a new apartment. The agency settled the lawsuit because it was cheaper than going through a long trial, said Monique Bond, a Housing Authority spokeswoman.

"We're sure Ms. Blakemore doesn't want to relive this anymore and neither to do we," Bond said. "This was the best option. Considering the financial implications and cost of litigation and the trauma for victims and staff, a settlement agreement was the best for all involved."

Bond said agency officials are already well trained on fair housing regulations, but the agency will now do more.

In the year that the matter was in court, the case took some twists and turns. Although housing officials said everything inside Blakemore's apartment was destroyed in the fire, they later returned some items to her, including metal urns that contained the ashes of relatives and some personal photos.

Blakemore's financial settlement will be placed in a trust to cover her personal needs, officials said.

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