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ACLU Files Complaint on Behalf of Black Transgender Woman Illegally Profiled and Jailed

An Iowa Civil Rights Commission complaint says a West Des Moines Hotel discriminated against Meagan Taylor based on her gender identity and race.

Des Moines, Iowa -- The American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU of Iowa filed a complaint today with the Iowa Civil Rights Commission against The Drury Inn in West Des Moines for discriminating against a Black transgender woman based on her gender identity and race in July 2015.

Amber Shanahan-Fricke and David Goldman of the Des Moines law firm of Babich Goldman, P.C. are ACLU of Iowa cooperating attorneys in the case.

Meagan Taylor, a Black transgender woman, and her best friend, who is also Black and transgender, checked into the Drury Inn, a hotel in West Des Moines, Iowa, on July 13 while traveling from Illinois to Kansas City for a funeral. Despite the fact that she and her friend had made reservations and that she was a regular patron of Drury Hotels, the pair were harassed and felt unwelcomed. Before finalizing the check-in, the front desk clerk – at the request of the general manager – asked to make a copy of Meagan’s ID even though they had already processed payment and checked her ID once. Like many transgender people, Meagan has not been able to update the name and gender on her ID so the identification listed her birth name and gender.

Called Police Because of "Men Dressed Like Women"

At some point between Meagan’s check-in and 8:30 the next morning, the Drury Inn staff called the police to report that they suspected Meagan and her friend were engaging in prostitution because they were “men dressed like women.”

“For Meagan, a stop at a hotel on the way to a funeral landed her in solitary confinement because she is Black and transgender. This type of profiling of transgender women of color is all too common and is part of the cycle that results in 41 percent of Black transgender women having been incarcerated at some point in their lives,” said Chase Strangio, attorney in the ACLU’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Project. “Such blatant discrimination and violation of Iowa law on behalf of hotel staff who called law enforcement to remove and arrest paying customers cannot be tolerated.”

Protected from Discrimination in Public Accommodation

Under Iowa’s civil rights law, race, sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation are among characteristics protected from discrimination by public accommodations. The law also defines gender identity as “a gender-related identity of a person, regardless of the person’s assigned sex at birth.”

As a result of the Drury's discrimination against her, Meagan was arrested and charged with possessing her hormone pills without a copy of the prescription – charges that were eventually dismissed. There was no evidence of prostitution and she was never charged with it.

Jailed for Eight Days

After arrest, she was held for eight days in Polk County Jail before being bonded out, never making it to the funeral in Kansas City that she was traveling to attend.

"What happened to Meagan was simply unacceptable and un-Iowan," said Rita Bettis, legal director of the ACLU of Iowa. "Iowans have long valued the importance of treating every person fairly, and Iowa law has expressly protected against this sort of harmful discrimination by businesses against their transgender customers since 2007."

In her complaint, Meagan said of the experience, "This ordeal was humiliating, scary and traumatizing. I felt powerless and degraded. I realized I was not welcome in a public place simply because of who I am."

The complaint filed today can be viewed at:

<http://www.aclu-ia.org/iowa/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Meagan-Taylor-Stamped-ICRC-Complaint.pdf>

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