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NEWS

As 'Fair Housing Act' hits 40, some goals still unmet

Howard Manly

Her name is Adrienne, and her story is all too typical for a single mother in search of affordable housing.

On a recent conference call to commemorate the 40th anniversary of passage of what has been commonly called "the Fair Housing Act," Adrienne talked about one property manager in the Boston area who refused to show her a townhouse for sale once he learned that she received a federal subsidy to supplement her job as, ironically, a housing case manager.

"Low- and moderate-income families like mine should not be locked out of decent housing opportunities in their own communities just because some sources of our income is received from a government agency," said Adrienne, who declined to provide her last name because her charges of discrimination are under state investigation.

Signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on April 11, 1968, just a week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Rights Act of 1968 was initially a follow-up to the more celebrated civil rights laws passed in 1964 and 1965. U.S. Sen. Edward Brooke, R-Mass., originally co-sponsored the legislation that overcame threats of filibusters from Southern congressmen and other stalling strategies to finally reach LBJ's desk.

The noble goal of ending housing discrimination still remains unachieved.

Ginny Hamilton, executive director of the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston, underscored that point during the telephone conference call.

"In 2007 alone," Hamilton said, "our organization received 270 calls for assistance, of which 110 were potential discrimination cases. We worked with 90 active cases and helped 35 people to resolve housing discrimination complaints."

Hamilton further explained that 30 percent of these clients were people with disabilities, 45 percent were African American or Latino, and 70 percent had a housing subsidy.

"The number of families seeking our assistance with



U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Robert C. Weaver (left) welcomes President Lyndon B. Johnson (right) on Sept. 9, 1968, at the ceremony dedicating the new HUD office building. Last Friday marked the 40th anniversary of Johnson's signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, commonly called "the Fair Housing Act," aimed at ending discriminatory practices in the search for affordable housing options. Four decades later, that goal remains unachieved. (AP photo)

... housing discrimination cases has more than doubled in the past year and tripled since 2005," she said.

That sort of climate has provided what Hamilton called a "brutal backdrop" for the ongoing subprime mortgage scandal.

"Our testing shows evidence of lending discrimination against African American and Latino homebuyers with good credit histories, sufficient savings and solid income to secure a prime market loan," Hamilton explained, pointing out the importance of affordable housing.

"Where we live determines the education, employment and social opportunities available to us and our children," she said.

Those local numbers mirror national statistics and, to at least one observer, demonstrate the lack of commitment that the Bush administration has shown in enforcing federal anti-discrimination laws.

Shanna Smith is the president and CEO of the National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA). Founded in 1988 and headquartered in Washington, D.C., the NFHA includes more than 220 private, nonprofit fair housing organizations, state and local civil rights agencies, and individuals from throughout the United States.

"Although more than 4 million people are discriminated against in housing transactions every year," Smith said, "the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] only handled 2,440 complaints last year and issued only 31 charges of discrimination; HUD's state and local government partners handled about 7,700 cases and the Department of Justice's Housing Section, with more than 35 lawyers, filed only 35 cases."

By comparison, Smith pointed out, the 85 nonprofit fair housing centers reported handling about 16,800 complaints last year.

"But this number still only reflects less than 1 percent of the instances of housing, lending and insurance discrimination that happen annually in the United States," she explained.

"On this 40th anniversary of the Fair Housing Act," Smith said, "we must live up to the dream of Dr. King by using the powerful tool of fair housing enforcement to the fullest extent possible. This doesn't mean passing any new laws — this just means enforcing the ones we already have."

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