

National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity

Forty years after the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 and twenty years after the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988, the National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity has been convened to address the significant and ongoing national catastrophes of housing discrimination and residential segregation. Although their antecedents are found in our country's deliberate history of establishing separate neighborhoods for black and white Americans, these issues are not merely historical. Today, they continue to play an active and significant role in the real estate rental, sales, lending and insurance markets. Furthermore, continuing practices of discrimination and segregation affect not only African-Americans, but also Latinos, Arab-Americans, Asian-Americans, families with children, and people with disabilities.

The National Commission will be co-chaired by two leaders in the area of housing policy and former Secretaries of the Department of Housing and Urban Development: Henry Cisneros and Jack Kemp. Other Commissioners will include Okianer Christian Dark, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the Howard University College of Law; Gordon Quan, Houston, Former Mayor Pro Tem and Chair of the Housing Committee for the City of Houston; Pat Combs, past President of the National Association of Realtors; Myron Orfield, Professor at the University of Minnesota School of Law; and I. King Jordan, President-Emeritus of Gallaudet University.

The Commission will conduct four daylong regional hearings – in Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and Atlanta, and one half day hearing – in Houston – to collect information and hear testimony about the nature and extent of illegal housing discrimination and its origins, its connection with government policy and practice, and its effect on our communities. The first hearing will be held in Chicago on July 15. The other hearings will be held in Los Angeles on September 9, Boston on September 22 and Atlanta on October 17. The half-day Houston hearing will be held on July 31 in conjunction with the annual conference of the National Bar Association. It will focus on housing discrimination and re-segregation on the Gulf Coast since the hurricanes and federal housing programs that have failed to promote residential integration.

Each hearing will open with a statement from one or more of the commissioners that will recognize local and regional issues of discrimination and segregation, historically and structurally. At every hearing, witnesses will be included that can speak to the role that government policy, private discrimination, and housing industry practices play in perpetuating housing discrimination and segregation.

The first hearing, in Chicago on July 15, will focus on the history of residential racial segregation and the nature and scope of housing discrimination. Witnesses will examine the extent of private actions of housing discrimination in various aspects of the housing market, focus on the demonstrable evidence that racial segregation still exists in our country, and identify some of the negative consequences of discrimination and segregation and the positive consequences of integration. In addition, witnesses will

review the connections between the actions of federal agencies that have fostered segregation and the failures of the federal government to enforce the federal Fair Housing Act to address housing discrimination systematically and systemically.

The second regional hearing will be held in Los Angeles. Witnesses at that hearing will look at today's foreclosure crisis, its linkage to acts of discrimination and its connection to segregated communities. In addition, witnesses will examine whether or not the federal government is providing vigorous fair housing enforcement and education for the public, for the housing industry, and for victims or potential victims of discrimination. Community decision-making in areas such as zoning, its consideration of affordable housing proposals and the expenditure of federal grants continues to play a major role in how communities are sustained and grown,. Witnesses will testify about opportunities to advance fair housing in local communities and at the state level. The nature and extent of discrimination based on disability and on ethnic and language minorities will also be examined.

The third regional hearing, in Boston, will focus on some of the key players in advancing fair housing, and the failures, and strengths, of those players. Witnesses will look at the role of housing choice, consistent with fair housing law and policy, in establishing vibrant and integrated communities, the connections between integrated communities and the quality of life for residents, and ways federal programs can be used to achieve these communities. Because effective enforcement of fair housing laws is a critical component of ensuring that communities and especially their schools are integrated, two panels will examine the ways in which stronger fair housing enforcement at the local and national level can be used to confront discrimination and segregation, and what is needed to make fair housing enforcement by non governmental entities and by the government more effective.

The final regional hearing, in Atlanta, will look at the track record of the federal government in enforcing fair housing laws and the ways in which it has failed our country, both in individual cases and in overlooking opportunities to address discrimination systemically. There are federal enforcement actions that can be taken to make fair housing enforcement a reality, and witnesses will testify about their vision of an effective federal, state and local enforcement system.

The hearings will culminate with the release of a report in Washington, DC in December, 2008 which will detail the testimony provided at the hearings and outline recommendations for action in the future.

The hearings will be held at accessible locations and sign language interpretation will be available. Streaming video presentations of the hearings will be available at <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/national-commission-on-fair-housing>

Maps demonstrating the extent of residential segregation in key communities across the region will be available at each hearing.

A photo exhibit, produced by photographer and civil rights icon Bernie Kleina, on the 1960s Chicago Freedom Movement will be featured at the Chicago hearing, along with videos showing some of the ways that discrimination occurs, and its effect on its victims.

The Commission was created through the partnership of four leading national civil rights organizations: the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund (LCCR/EF); the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under Law (LCCRUL); the National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA); and NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF). These organizations are uniquely qualified to carry out this project. All four organizations share a commitment to fair housing carried out over decades and have worked together collaboratively on several initiatives. NFHA, LCCRUL and LDF serve on the executive committee of the LCCR, the sister organization to LCCR/EF, a coalition of nearly 200 national organizations. The LCCRUL, whose mission is to involve the private bar in providing legal services to address racial discrimination, implemented a National Commission on Voting Rights in 2005 and staged ten hearings across the country providing the entire record to the US Congress leading to the reauthorization of that seminal civil rights law in 2007. LCCR/EF, LDF and LCCRUL worked in collaboration with several other organizations to implement a public education campaign about the ongoing need for stronger enforcement of voting rights. The NAACP LDF is America's legal counsel on issues of race. Through advocacy and litigation, LDF pursues racial justice to move our nation toward a society that fulfills the promise of equality for all Americans. NFHA, the leading voice for fair housing, is the only national organization dedicated solely to ending discrimination related to housing in the United States. It is a consortium of more than 220 private, non-profit fair housing organizations, state and local civil rights agencies, and individuals from throughout the United States.

The Poverty and Race Research Action Council, along with fair housing consultant Sara Pratt and the Raben Group, LLC, are providing staff/consulting support to the Commission, along with pro bono assistance of several cooperating law firms recruited by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.