

HOPE Fair Housing Center
2100 Manchester Road, Building C-1620
Wheaton, IL 61087
630-690-6500 www.hopefair.org

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Forty five years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King focused the Chicago Freedom Movement on fair and open housing and on ending racial segregation. This was the first large scale fair housing campaign in the country and the most ambitious civil rights campaign in the North. It placed the issue of equal opportunity in housing and the fight against housing discrimination not just before the people of Chicago, but before the Nation. I was part of that campaign and documented it photographically.

Interestingly, the color barrier to the White House has fallen, but the color barrier to so many homes and neighborhoods remains. Last year an African-American family went to view a home in a Chicago Suburb with the intent to possibly purchase it. Neighbors across the street from that house shouted threatening and racist insults at the family and then defiantly replaced the American flag on their front porch with a Confederate flag. The African-American family decided not to buy the home. The color barrier there remains intact.

The reality of racial segregation and discrimination in housing denies and compromises the rights guaranteed to all Americans and continues to threaten our schools, neighborhoods, communities and cities alike. Incredibly, segregation in Chicago has at best, remained about the same, as it was when Dr. King initiated the Chicago fair housing campaign in 1965. Noted sociologists Nancy A. Denton and Douglas Massey identify Chicago as a city that is "hyper-segregated." They point out that Chicago is only 5% more integrated today than it was in 1970, that Chicago and the Metropolitan Area continue as one of the most segregated regions in America.

Last year, 2009, HOPE Fair Housing Center investigated a total of 2,091 housing discrimination complaints, of which 385 were based on Race; 161 on Disability; 650 on National Origin; and 743 on Familial Status. This was accomplished even though there was a significant reduction in private financial contributions and awards.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's last "Housing Discrimination Study" showed that African-American and Latinos seeking to buy homes in the Chicago area, experience some form of discrimination in nearly one in five interactions with sales agents. When it came to the rental market, African-Americans experienced discrimination in one in five encounters, while Latinos were treated less favorably than whites in one in four transactions. Practically speaking, this means that African-Americans and Latinos experience housing discrimination every time they shop to buy or to rent a home.

Discrimination and segregation in housing and housing related services have had and still have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and our entire Nation. Where we live determines what kind of education our children will have. In fact, the segregation of communities and the segregation of schools are inseparable. Historically, the vast majority of segregated minority schools have been plagued by a lack of resources that are essential to a learning environment. Segregated minority schools generally have fewer qualified and experienced teachers, higher teacher turnover rates, larger class sizes, fewer advanced classes, inferior infrastructure, and fewer basic educational supplies. Also, where we live determines what kinds of professional and social associations we will have in our community. It determines what kinds of physical danger we will be exposed to, what kinds of values and expectations will be open to us, as well as what kinds of job opportunities will be nearby.

In very practical terms, what does it mean for example, for an African-American young man to grow up in a racially segregated minority neighborhood in Chicago? It means that the State will spend far less on his education than it spends on predominantly white schools. It means as an African-American, he has a 50% chance of finishing high school and the odds of going to prison are greater for him than going to college. His net worth will be 600% less than white Americans and access to jobs, health care, and open space will be limited. It means that he will repeatedly experience discrimination in his search for housing.

Although housing discrimination is now generally more subtle, the results for families and individuals are still devastating. The most frequent problems HOPE and our clients face in our service area include the following issues: racial and ethnic steering; lying about housing availability; landlords using voice mail and voice recognition as a way to discriminate; flagrant practices of racial and ethnic harassment; disparate and overzealous enforcement or neglect of local housing codes, including invasive searches and early morning raids by municipal governments of homes of minority families; intimidating use of police presence; home builders who refuse to make newly constructed housing accessible; and housing providers who refuse to make reasonable accommodations to persons with disabilities and discrimination against families with Housing Choice Vouchers.

Housing discrimination and segregation diminishes everyone. They strike at the heart of the American Dream – the right to live in the home of one's choice. Many home seekers are not knowledgeable of their fair housing rights and/or do not know what constitutes housing discrimination, and do not know who to call if their rights are violated. More needs to be done to make home seekers aware of both their rights and responsibilities as homeowners or home renters. More needs to be done to empower individuals and families, strengthen grass-roots efforts and nurture understanding so that injustice and inequality in housing will be a thing of the past.

Bernard J. Kleina
Executive Director
HOPE Fair Housing Center