



## **In Search of Equal Housing Opportunities**

By: The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center

The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center (the Center) is a private, nonprofit civil rights organization established to eradicate housing discrimination in New Orleans. For more than a decade, the Center has aggressively advocated for victims of housing discrimination. It has filed more than 20 lawsuits in state and federal court and has assisted in excess of 120 complainants in filing administrative complaints. In addition, the Center provides housing-related technical assistance and referrals to approximately 1,500 callers per year.

The federal Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, disability, family status, and/or national origin (42 U.S.C. § 3604). These bases of protection are commonly referred to as protected classes. Since Hurricane Katrina, the Center has received an overwhelming number of calls about discriminatory treatment in housing. Complainants and independent investigation have uncovered the following:

- Some landlords have represented to Black home seekers that vacant, livable units were unavailable or unlivable
- Black home seekers have been charged more rent and higher deposits than their White counterparts
- Rental agents failed to return messages to Black home seekers while returning the calls of their White counterparts
- Rental agents offered special inducements like lower security deposits to White home seekers, while failing to offer the same to their Black counterparts
- People with mobility impairments have complained that there are few accessible housing units available
- At least five websites, setup to assist evacuees in finding housing, one of which was endorsed by FEMA, ran discriminatory housing advertisements

A study by the National Fair Housing Alliance compiled after Hurricane Katrina found that White evacuees seeking housing were treated more favorably than Black evacuees seeking housing, 66% of the time.

The Center acted swiftly in response to these discriminatory housing practices in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The organization filed a complaint against the five Internet sites that posted discriminatory advertisements based upon a person's race, religion, national origin, sex, and familial status. The advertisements included phrases such as, "not racist, but whites only." To date, many of the advertisements have been removed, although the administrative complaints are still pending.



In November 2005, the Center filed a complaint against the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) after learning that the few available public housing units in the City located at the redeveloped St. Thomas housing development were actually being leased to the housing authority's employees, rather than to returning, mostly Black, St. Thomas residents. This is despite a conciliation agreement between HUD, HANO, the Center, and former St. Thomas residents requiring that a preference be given to former residents of the development.

In December 2005, the Center filed suit against the City of Denham Springs, on behalf of a nonprofit housing provider for people with mental disabilities. The City is alleged to have applied its zoning code in a manner that discriminated against Katrina evacuees with mental disabilities by refusing to reasonably accommodate a group home established by the Options foundation, a Baton Rouge nonprofit organization.

The Fair Housing Action Center has also conducted significant education and outreach surrounding fair housing issues. In December the Center, along with the African American Forum on Race and Regionalism, the Center for Social Inclusion (CSI), the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Poverty & Race Research Action Council, and the Structural Racism Caucus hosted a public forum on the role of race in rebuilding New Orleans and other affected areas in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This event accomplished the goal of reaching a diverse group of individuals committed to rebuilding an integrated New Orleans that acknowledges issues of race and class in the process.

As housing is rebuilt in the affected areas, it is of particular concern that the housing is accessible to people with mobility impairments, especially in light of revised flood elevation requirements. In response to such concerns, the Center conducted training on accessibility-related issues for the housing industry in November 2005.

In addition to fair housing enforcement and outreach in Louisiana, the Center has addressed post-Katrina discriminatory housing practices before members of Congress. In January and February 2006, the Center's Executive Director, James Perry, made appearances before the Housing Subcommittee on Housing and Equal Opportunity to make members aware of discriminatory housing practices in New Orleans and to advocate for strong legislation that adequately addressed such problems.

The work of the Center now, more than ever, will play a significant role in ensuring that communities in New Orleans are integrated and accessible to all residents. In the days ahead, the Center is confronted with the challenges of securing the necessary funding to adequately meet the needs of housing discrimination victims. Indeed, the Gulf States have entered a new chapter in



dealing with the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Housing, housing, and housing continue to be the pressing needs of residents, many of whom are poor and African American.

Equal housing opportunity and desegregation of New Orleans neighborhoods must be the guiding principle for any successful rebuilding effort. Through advocacy and enforcement of anti-discrimination law and policy, the work of the Center will continue to play a vital role in the rebuilding of inclusive and equitable housing for all New Orleans residents.