

Baltimore County signs agreement with HUD to end decades of housing discrimination

Baltimore Neighborhoods Inc., the NAACP of Baltimore Co., three residents of Baltimore Co. and the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development have signed an agreement with Baltimore Co. to begin unwinding decades of housing discrimination against African Americans, families with children and people with disabilities.

The agreement is the result of a complaint filed with HUD in 2011 over entrenched, long-term Baltimore Co. practices that ignored the needs of a significant portion of county residents. Those practices created and reinforced residential segregation, including exclusionary zoning, resistance to subsidized housing and openly discriminatory housing and development policies— funded, in large part, by federal tax dollars.

The County's own 2012 Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing described Baltimore Co. as the most segregated major jurisdiction in Maryland, and the Baltimore region as the 16th most segregated metropolitan area in the country. Baltimore Co. has never had any public housing and currently has fewer than 1,400 privately owned subsidized housing units open to families, despite a voucher waiting list of over 15,000 households. In contrast, the County has actively used federal and state housing funds to build elderly housing, which in Baltimore Co. is mostly occupied by whites.

“We can't change the past, but Baltimore County can now do better going forward,” said Tony Fugett, president of the Baltimore Co. branch of the NAACP. “Opening up opportunities throughout the county for low-income families to live, work and go to school are the first important steps in creating a more inclusive Baltimore County. While only a beginning, it is our hope that this agreement marks a turning of the page from a long history of segregation and exclusion.”

Key provisions include development of 1,000 affordable homes (with 10 percent fully accessible for residents with disabilities and 50 percent with three bedrooms), and the placement of 2,000 families with housing vouchers in areas of opportunity throughout the county.

The County also agreed to provide \$30 million in local funds over the next 10 years to help finance the new affordable housing and an additional \$3 million to pay for disability upgrades to existing affordable homes.

“This landmark agreement also promotes future fair housing compliance and enforcement through education and outreach initiatives, complaint investigations, testing and other initiatives,” said Robert Strupp, executive director of BNI, a nonprofit fair housing program. “We look forward to working with the County to make this agreement a reality.”

The county residents with disabilities in the complaint said they paid full rent for units that lacked accessible toilets, showers and kitchens. “We have suffered falls and injuries and even burns from living in inaccessible housing,” said Myesha Allender, who uses a wheelchair. “Some of us lived trapped in our homes, unable to navigate steps.”

Rhonda Myers, another complainant, was happy that the agreement was finally signed. “I joined this fight so other people can have homes that are fully accessible,” Myers said. “It has been a long time coming.”

The complainants were represented by attorneys from the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau, Maryland Disability Law Center, the Public Justice Center, the Homeless Persons Representation Project, the ACLU of Maryland, and the national NAACP.

The agreement will send a message to other jurisdictions, said Fugett of the Baltimore Co. NAACP chapter: “Other counties should take note and begin to change the kinds of policies that reinforce segregation, and instead act to further fair housing”

Added BNI’s Strupp: “This agreement should be a positive example for other jurisdictions throughout Maryland and the nation committed to fair housing and equal opportunity for families, those with disabilities and others protected by fair housing laws.”

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