

My name is Nicole Smith and I support the Thompson v. HUD settlement because of the warm welcome that I received in my new neighborhood in Howard County. I grew up in public housing in Baltimore City and have lived in at least three different public housing projects (Cherry Hill, Murphy Homes and Westport) since I was a child. When I got older, my mom worked hard and was able to purchase a house in a struggling neighborhood in Baltimore. Despite the fact that she and I were working full-time, we were unable to make ends meet and the house was foreclosed on.

My family and I signed up for public housing and section 8 in 2004. My name finally came to the top of the public housing waiting list in 2007 at the same time that I learned about the MBQ program through word of mouth. I knew what to expect in public housing: drugs, violence, crime and poor housing. The *Thompson* voucher, on the other hand, would give me an opportunity to move to neighborhoods that I would not otherwise have access to. I chose the MBQ program because it provided a way out for my 11 year-old son and me. They helped me to clean up my credit, taught me about budgeting and took me on a housing tour where I saw nice houses, lots of green spaces and young kids playing outside. My son and I found a home in Columbia and I feel like a part of the community here.

After moving through the program, I was able to get a job working for Howard County schools in their Before and After Care program and was just promoted to Assistant Director. I also enrolled in Howard County Community College and I am studying early childhood education. I hope to be able to go on to receive a bachelor's degree in order to become an elementary school teacher.

Not only have I found opportunity and happiness here, but so has my son. In the city, I did not want my son to play outside, he didn't have many friends and he struggled in school. Here, he is doing very well in school and our neighbors are welcoming -- often picking him up after school while I'm working and arranging play dates and carpools. On his birthday, for the first time in his life, I was able to give him a birthday party at a local park. So many kids and parents came from the neighborhood and from his school to show their support for him. It was very moving. I support the settlement because other kids deserve to have the love and support that my son and I have.

Nicole Smith