

Fair Housing: It's Your Right **(*La Columna Vertebral*/The Support Column)**

By Ellen Alderton

The Civil Rights Movement blazed a trail across American history, and many people in this country have undoubtedly heard of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that affirmed the right of all citizens to vote regardless of their income, level of education or ethnic origin. Fewer people, probably, are aware of another significant piece of civil rights legislation from this same time period: the 1968 Fair Housing Act.

The Fair Housing Act, together with a later piece of national legislation, the 1988 Fair Housing Amendments Act, guarantees all American citizens and legal residents the same rights of access to housing regardless of their race, origin, religion or parenthood status. Despite these important protections, the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports that minorities in the United States – and particularly Latinos – nevertheless experience high levels of discrimination when they look for housing.

In 2000, the Urban Institute conducted a study that found that “Hispanic renters today are facing higher levels of discrimination than African Americans.” Regarding the purchase of housing, the study found that “Hispanic buyers also meet with significant levels of discrimination.”

Discrimination can take place during any part of the process of searching for housing – beginning with rental or real estate advertisements that imply that certain types of renters or buyers are not welcome. In addition, certain real estate agents or landlords may outright refuse to sell or rent a property based on a potential client's race. Others may lie about the availability of a particular piece of property. Additional dirty tricks include only showing certain types of homes to certain consumers, and “redlining;” that is, refusing to extend credit, to lend, sell or provide insurance within a given geographic area to people of a particular race.

Fortunately, the Fair Housing Act empowers HUD to enforce citizens' rights to access to housing. Anyone who has experienced discrimination may register a complaint with this federal agency, and HUD then investigates these complaints free of charge. HUD also supports a wide network of local and state agencies across the country that promote fair housing and that provide free or low-cost advice and legal consulting. In cases where a discrimination complaint is verified, the seller or renter may not only be obliged to make the property available, but may also be forced to pay damages and punitive fines.

Yet, most Latinos, when facing housing discrimination, do not exercise their right to lodge a formal complaint. While HUD estimates that one in four Latinos experienced discrimination in rental transactions in 2002, for example, only 635 formal complaints were lodged by Latinos nationwide in this same year.

Of course, Latinos are not the only ones not to take advantage of their rights. Regardless of ethnic origin, 83 percent of people who have experienced housing discrimination take no action. But, there are factors that can make Latinos less likely than other members of the population to claim their rights to fair housing. Lack of trust in U.S. governmental agencies, not understanding the legal processes, not speaking English or not wanting to reach beyond familiar circles for help can all discourage people from exercising their civil rights.

Don't let these barriers prevent you or someone in your family from seeking the help you need. In the words of the great civil rights activist, Cesar Chavez, "no one is so strong that they do not need help sometimes." For more information about how to report a case of housing discrimination, and for referrals to free or low-cost counseling services in your area, call your National Latino Resource Help-Line at 1 (800) 473-3003. All calls are confidential.