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HUD seeks help with anti-gay discrimination study

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Associated Press Writer= CHICAGO (AP) — When federal officials studied housing discrimination based on race, the setup was simple: They sent in testers of different backgrounds and gauged how landlords and real estate agents treated people of color compared with whites.

As the government prepares a first-ever study of housing discrimination against gays, however, the issue is more complex. How do you design a study to make an applicant's sexual orientation or gender identity as obvious as race and color?

Starting Thursday, the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department will enlist residents in three cities with large gay populations — Chicago, New York and San Francisco — to offer ideas on how such a study should be conducted.

Bias complaints and lawsuits nationwide make clear that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people face housing discrimination, from being turned down for apartments to being steered away from certain neighborhoods, but no one has tried to track how common such bias is. HUD hopes to begin collecting data next year.

"This really is groundbreaking," said Raphael Bostic, HUD's assistant secretary for policy development and research, who's overseeing the study. "Nothing like this has ever been tried before at this scale and certainly not by a federal agency."

Several organizations and states have conducted smaller studies, but experts said no one has had the time or money for a national study. There's also the issue of how to design the study to ensure it detects actual bias.

Those testing "have to think of a way to make it clear that this is a gay couple and not just two men who really can't afford to do anything than get a single apartment with a single room," said John Knight of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Bostic said researchers plan to get "creative" in designing the study, and he hopes the input and stories from meetings in the three cities will help. Officials are working on a way to let people elsewhere weigh in through e-mail or Web-based seminars, he said.

The federal Fair Housing Act, which prohibits discrimination in sales and rentals of homes, doesn't cover gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. Advocates hope HUD's effort to gather data could be a first step toward obtaining legal protections.

"It finally will give us hard data to back up the heartbreaking stories of discrimination we've been hearing for years," said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "This HUD study will show that there are a class of people ... who have been repeatedly shut out of that portion of the American dream."

Chicago, New York and San Francisco all ban housing discrimination based on sexual

orientation and, more recently, gender identity. The number of complaints about anti-gay bias filed with authorities has been relatively low — generally less than 10 percent of all housing complaints — but that can be attributed to some declining to out themselves by stepping forward, advocates said.

Fear of being outed is also a reason to hold the HUD sessions in big cities, where anti-gay bias may be less prevalent than elsewhere but where people also are more willing to discuss it when it happens, said Carey.

A study by Michigan's Fair Housing Centers, a group of private advocacy organizations, found nearly 30 percent of same-sex couples were treated differently when trying to buy or rent a home. Such treatment included a male landlord who made sexually charged comments to a lesbian couple and a Detroit landlord who told testers, "No drugs, prostitution, homosexuality, one-night stands."

Bill Greaves, Chicago's liaison to the gay community, said he expects people to describe a different type of housing discrimination.

"I think people are going to say that the discrimination in the rental and sale of housing is less a problem than the harassment and discrimination people experience after they've moved into their new home," Greaves said. He described a case in which Chicago awarded \$12,000 in damages to a gay man after his landlord outed him to his family, called him derogatory names and threatened to evict him.

HUD also is developing regulations to ensure gays and lesbians aren't denied access to federally subsidized housing based on their sexual orientation. Bostic said the Obama administration is committed to working with the community on housing issues.

"The president has this as a priority," he said.