

FAIR HOUSING

Center battles bias in housing

By Keith Roberts

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More help is available for those who believe they might be victims of housing discrimination.

The Ann Arbor-based Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan has been taking complaints about housing discrimination in Jackson County. But thanks to a three-year, \$500,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, it also provides a range of services including undercover testing, investigations, advocacy, education and attorney referrals.

"The word is not really out yet," Executive Director Pamela Kisch said. "That's what we're working on."

Jackson had a private, non-profit fair housing center, but funding was cut several years ago. The Community Action Agency has been offering fair-housing educational programs but not investigations.

The Jackson Human Relations Commission was considering contracting with a fair housing agency in Kalamazoo when the Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan received a grant in December to expand its op-

erations in Jackson, Ingham and Livingston counties.

"I'm thrilled such a competent agency has stepped up," said Kathleen Conley, chairwoman of the Human Relations Commission. "They are a force in their home county (Washtenaw). They have been really successful legally and professionally."

Kisch said from Dec. 8 to June 7, the center received five fair-housing complaints from Jackson County, 7 percent of its total for its six-county area.

The most common complaints are from people who believe they were discriminated against because of their race or disability or because they had children when they tried to rent, buy or finance housing.

Kisch said discrimination can be subtle, and she urges people who think they may have been discriminated against and aren't sure whether to report it to "err on the side of letting us know what's going on."

"I really want to emphasize if they have any reason to think they have experienced housing discrimination, to call us to talk about it," Kisch said. "Don't let it go. If it's happened to you, it's probably happened to somebody else, and you can be the person to stop it."

How to help

The Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan is looking for people of all ethnic backgrounds and people with disabilities to serve as fair-housing discrimination testers. For more information, call 877-979-FAIR (3247).