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Ann Arbor Realtors group taking stand against housing discrimination

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"The time is always right to do what is right," reads this Black Lives Matter sign quoting Martin Luther King Jr. outside a home in Ann Arbor on Jan. 20, 2021. Ryan Stanton | The Ann Arbor News

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ANN ARBOR, MI — Real estate agents have an important role to play when it comes to ending housing discrimination, says Tom Renkert, CEO of the Ann Arbor Area Board of Realtors.

That's why his group, which represents over 1,000 members, is partnering with the Ypsilanti-based Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid Michigan to support the 2021 Realtors for Fair Housing Campaign.

The group announced its participation this past week, reiterating its commitment to diverse communities and asking local real estate agents to donate to the cause and publicly pledge support for adhering to the letter and spirit of fair housing laws.

Funds raised will support the Fair Housing Center's fight against discrimination in housing and public accommodations and promote accessible, integrated communities, the group said.

"This April, the nation will be celebrating the 52nd anniversary of the Fair Housing Act," Ann Arbor Area Board of Realtors leaders and Fair Housing Center Executive Director Pam Kisch stated in a letter to local real estate agents.

"This landmark civil rights legislation was the result of years of individual and collective struggle against discrimination in sales, rental, financing and other housing-related transactions. The act now protects the buyer or renter of a dwelling from discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, and familial status."

Researchers map Ann Arbor's racist history of housing discrimination

The letter asks for at least 200 local real estate agents to join the campaign and add their names to the list of those publicly taking a stand against housing discrimination. The group plans to publish the list in the Ann Arbor Observer in April to send a strong message to the public that "our communities are no place for unfair treatment."

"Now could not be a more important time in our history to show your commitment to equality and fairness," the letter states.

The Ann Arbor Area Board of Realtors kicked off the campaign with a \$2,000 contribution last month.

Founded in 1992, the Fair Housing Center works to protect the civil rights of those discriminated against in the rental, sale or financing of housing, including taking legal action.

The center takes an average of about 170 complaints each year from its 10-county service area in Clinton, Eaton, Hillsdale, Ingham, Jackson, Lenawee, Livingston, Monroe, Shiawassee and Washtenaw counties.

It recently helped an interracial couple file a housing discrimination lawsuit against Livingston County real estate agents, claiming the couple was illegally prevented from buying a home on Zukey Lake in Hamburg Township, violating the federal Fair Housing Act, because the husband is Black.

The couple came to the Fair Housing Center, which did an investigation and helped line up one of its cooperating attorneys to take the case, Kisch said.

Housing discrimination isn't as overt today as it used to be in the days when "whites only" policies were openly stated, but it still exists, Kisch said.

"Things are getting slightly better, but we're still seeing intolerable levels of discrimination based on race and national origin," she said, noting another common complaint is discrimination based on physical disability.

Kisch said her organization doesn't hear as many complaints about discrimination in real estate sales as it does in rental housing because a lot of real estate agents are doing the right thing and it can be difficult for someone to know if they're being discriminated against.

When potential homebuyers are discriminated against, their real estate agents are hurt by it, too, because their pay is based on commission, she noted.

In addition to helping generate the \$150,000 the Fair Housing Center needs to raise for its budget, the Realtors for Fair Housing Campaign is about getting real estate agents thinking and talking about fair housing, Kisch said.

"We know that there are real estate agents out there who are not following the law and their colleagues probably know it, so it's not only that you do the right thing, but that you don't allow other colleagues to violate the Fair Housing Act," she said.

Interracial couple suing Livingston County realtors for racial bias

America's long history of housing discrimination has been a topic of discussion among Ann Arbor leaders lately as they've discussed racist practices of the past and how current zoning may still contribute to segregation.

With the help of University of Michigan researchers, they're now exploring the area's history of racist covenants that historically prevented Blacks and other people of color from owning homes in some parts of Ann Arbor.

Even though the covenants are no longer enforceable, they still exist and follow properties as they're sold, and cause consternation when homebuyers see them.

"It's just a sad, sad situation," said Alex Milshteyn, an Ann Arbor planning commissioner, who said it's something he deals with every day as a real estate agent.

Mike Steinberg, a UM law professor, has teamed up with Rob Goodspeed, a UM urban planning assistant professor, to map all the racist covenants in Ann Arbor and get rid of them.

Through their research so far, they've found 66 plats or subdivisions created between 1912 and 1952 that contain racially restrictive covenants, and one from 1970.

"Although they haven't been enforceable since 1948 in Shelley vs. Kramer, they still exist on the houses and they cause real harm to people," Steinberg said. "You can imagine a person of color reading their closing packet and seeing that they're not welcome in their neighborhood."

It's like having a "whites only" sign at a neighborhood entrance, Steinberg said.

The National Association of Realtors president recently issued a formal apology for the industry's past policies that contributed to segregation and racial inequality in America, Milshteyn noted at a recent Planning Commission meeting.

"As part of that apology, there's a lot of grant money from the National Association of Realtors that's been put forth to the states and the local associations to try to combat the tactics that were used and could potentially still be used today," he said, adding the real estate community realizes it was a part of the problem and is trying to fix it.

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