

FAIR HOUSING OF THE DAKOTAS

(The Fair Housing of the Dakotas serves North and South Dakota and works to eliminate housing discrimination and to ensure equal housing opportunities for all.)

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**Testimony before the
House Government & Veterans Affairs Committee
on House Bill 1259
by the Fair Housing of the Dakotas
January 23, 2009**

Madam Chair, and members of the Committee, my name is Amy S. Nelson and I am the Executive Director of the Fair Housing of the Dakotas (FHD). The FHD is a non-profit agency which serves North and South Dakota. We work to eliminate housing discrimination and to ensure equal housing opportunities for all. The FHD educates the public on Fair Housing Laws and also investigates allegations of housing discrimination. The Federal Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination in the rental, sale or financing of housing due to race, color, religion, national origin, gender (sex), presence of children (familial status) and disability (handicap). North Dakota state law also provides these protections as well as due to age (40 and over) and status with respect to marriage and public assistance.

The FHD also receives a number of contacts from the public regarding housing questions and problems which do not contain allegations of housing discrimination. In 2008, we received 1,711 contacts from North Dakotans with housing questions. In the past year, we have seen an increase in contacts by renters and landlords because people are unable to pay rent. We received 191 contacts from tenants who had been served eviction notices or were expecting to be served eviction notices and 34 contacts from housing providers who had questions on how to evict tenants. The vast majority of these calls from both tenants and housing providers were regarding unpaid rent. For tenants who were finding difficulty in making rent, we would refer them to agencies who might be able to provide them with temporary financial support but often would hear back that these agencies were unable to meet the demand. Most often the tenants who contacted us were working and unable to afford rent because of unexpected expenses related to medical needs, transportation, childcare or rising costs. Work layoffs and losses of employment were also listed as reasons. The contacts to us were from a variety of age groups.

Another group who contacted us had concerns about rental hikes. I don't have specific numbers for this area but those who contacted us were typically on fixed incomes and struggling to meet increasing rental costs. This call is becoming frighteningly common in the western half of the state where in recent months we have seen a dramatic increase in rental prices. Tenants who have been residing in housing for years are seeing jumps of sometimes hundreds of dollars per month because of the demand for housing. These tenants become displaced because their wages have not adjusted at those same rates.

We also received 53 contacts regarding people who needed housing assistance and referred them to the appropriate agency to apply. People also contact us who are frustrated at the long waiting lists for housing assistance and question if any other type of assistance is available and we must inform them that there is nothing else short or long term that we are aware of. I do not have an accurate count as to these numbers.



We also receive a number of contacts each year from people who are unable to locate affordable housing for their families. In addition, affordable AND accessible housing for those with disabilities is a severe need from the contacts we receive. So often the properties which meet accessibility requirements are newer properties outside the affordability of those with disabilities. Another issue which concerns us is the number of contacts we receive regarding substandard housing. People desperate for a roof over their head are forced into the only housing that they can afford which is housing which often does not meet basic health and safety code. These people are especially vulnerable. The lack of funds for inspectors and enforcement of code violations in many communities adds to this problem. In addition, most people will not complain to government officials about their substandard housing out of fear of retaliation by their housing provider and lose the only roof over their head. In rural areas, inspectors are not available if people were willing to complain. Options are hard to come by, especially in rural areas.

The latter half of 2008, we also started seeing contacts from tenants who were renting property which was being foreclosed upon because their landlord had not made payment or discovered that their landlord had not been paying utilities when their utilities were turned off. These tenants have few options except to move unexpectedly. This is an area that previous to 2008 we rarely had calls on.

Although the perception is that North Dakota has been isolated from the current economic crisis, we have not found this to be so. Many hard working and low income North Dakotans are being priced out of their housing and are in severe danger of being homeless or forced into substandard housing or have already had this happen. Because of these reasons, the Fair Housing of the Dakotas supports passage of House Bill 1259. I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today and please let me know if you have any questions or need any additional information.