

Housing discrimination reported up in Norwalk

NORWALK

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Housing discrimination continues to rise in Norwalk, likely due to the recession, according to the city's fair housing officer.

On Tuesday afternoon, Fair Housing Officer Margaret K. Suib submitted her Norwalk Fair Housing Officer's Annual Report Fiscal Year 2009-10 to the Norwalk Fair Housing Advisory Commission for consideration and adoption. The commission adopted the report after reviewing it page by page, and recommending several language changes.

"Something that jumped out at me, discrimination issues have increased by 75 percent," said Jeffrey A. Ingraham, commission chairman, while reviewing one section of the report.

According to the report, discrimination issues increased 75 percent, from 64 to 112, in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, and another 13 percent, in the fiscal year ending June, 30, 2010. Most of the discrimination complaints were based upon color or race, followed by disability, family status, national origin, marital status, and sex or gender, according to Suib.

While technically finished according to economists, the Great Recession which began in 2008 doesn't feel like it is over and recovery is slow at best, wrote Suib in her report.

"A housing bubble and irresponsible, predatory lending were the cause of the beginning of this economic downturn. Job losses continue to compound housing problems," Suib wrote. "Hard economic times traditionally lead to an increase in discrimination and we have seen that all across the country. It's a perfect storm for highly challenging times for Norwalk Fair Housing."

Among the other issues highlighted by Suib in her annual report: Norwalk

Housing Authority Policies and Practices, including where Housing Authority tenants are adequately informed about their rights under the law.

Suib told commissioners that she was once invited by the Housing Authority to provide such training. Prior to fiscal year 2006-07, Suib participated in numerous training sessions for Section 8 voucher holders and/or new tenants of the authority. Since then, Suib has been invited to either none or one a year, according to her report.

The topic prompted discussion among Fair Housing Advisory commissioners about whose responsibility such training is.

"Some of these things that are addressed in here have been going on for a while, and the Norwalk Housing Authority has refused to address them," said Commissioner Carol Frank. "The fair housing officer has not been invited to participate, and I think that they have to train people, and they have to know that Margaret is here to help them, and what is available to them."

Ingraham suggested revising language within the report "to express it in the positive rather than the negative."

"The Norwalk Housing Authority is encouraged to use the services of the fair housing officer relative to the training of its residents," Ingraham said. "So rather than kind of putting them on the defensive, (the NHA) is encouraged to make use of the services of the fair housing officer."

The executive director of the Housing Authority could not be reached for comment Tuesday afternoon.

The annual report is part of Suib's responsibilities as the city's fair housing officer. Her position was created in 1986 as the result of a settlement to a lawsuit brought by the Norwalk chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People against the city over alleged housing discrimination.