

Lowell, state leaders talk fair housing

Event part of a statewide listening tour to allocate funding under the Affordable Homes Act



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LOWELL — Destiny Maxam, 32, who is disabled and uses a wheelchair, lived in a nursing home for five years because there were no accessible housing options available for her.

Housing waivers and subsidies, as well as fair housing protections, allowed her to move out of that placement and live independently in the community. She shared her story during a Greater Lowell regional listening session held at UTEC Thursday afternoon.

Maxam said her reasonable accommodations were not about “preference or special request,” but about “equity and access.”

“I hope that we can continue to strengthen fair housing practices for disabled people moving forward,” she said. “Thank you continuing to build systems that support access, dignity and stability for disabled people and their families.”

The [Office of Fair Housing](#), under the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, was established by the Healey-Driscoll administration’s [Affordable Homes Act](#) to support fair housing initiatives, including enforcement, testing, outreach and education, as well as to collaborate with other state agencies to advance fair housing policies and programs.

Healey signed the Affordable Homes Act, an initiative to increase housing production and invest in livable communities, in 2024.

Whitney Demetrius was the state’s inaugural fair housing director, and she chaired the event that was organized by her office, the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments and Community Teamwork Inc.

“Fair housing,” she said, “is the right to live where people want that is free from housing discrimination.”

In the commonwealth, it is illegal to discriminate in housing based on the following protected bases: race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (for instance,

children under 18), disability, source of income/public or housing subsidy (such as a Section 8 voucher), sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ancestry, marital status, veteran or military status, or genetic information.

“Everyone is a member of a protected class,” Demetrius said. “Think of fair housing in terms of the law, but also dignity, inclusion and opportunity.”

The meeting hall at UTEC was packed with residents who listened to opening statements from state and local leadership, such as Lowell Mayor Erik Gitschier, state Reps. Rodney Elliott and Vanna Howard, and CTI CEO Carl Howell. A community action agency, CTI provides support and services to 70 different communities in the commonwealth and administers fair housing programs and housing supports.

Jennifer Raitt, the executive director of NMCOG, a regional planning agency, introduced the parameters of the fair housing listening session.

All municipalities in the commonwealth belong to a regional planning agency, and NMCOG is one of those 13 regional agencies. It serves the communities of Lowell, Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Pepperell, Tewksbury, Tyngsboro and Westford.

“There continues to be longstanding structural barriers and accessing home ownership opportunities,” she said. “But it’s particularly acute in Gateway Cities like the city of Lowell.”

She said NMCOG is working directly with local communities to address fair housing issues, as well as housing availability and affordability issues. The agency is collaborating with municipal leaders to develop a 10-year regional housing plan called [“At Home in Greater Lowell.”](#)

“Fair housing is part of that strategy,” Raitt said.

In a slide deck presented during her remarks, Raitt said that disability was the highest housing discrimination complaint by category followed by race and age.

“Current data reveals many fair housing concerns,” Raitt said. “It touches everyone in different ways.”

On the advocacy front, CTI Fair Housing Coordinator Aaron Ginsberg said although over half of the housing discrimination complaints that are filed are on the basis of disability, discrimination against any member of the protected classes is illegal.

He gave examples of discrimination, such as skipping over someone’s name on a housing application because it’s identifiably ethic, or refusal to rent or sell housing to somebody because of their race or gender.

But Ginsberg also outlined situations where the law helps people, as in Maxam's case, with accommodations to ensure that people have the right to live where they want free from housing discrimination.

"You may receive preferential parking for a mobility impairment so you can have larger space or a space closer to the entrance," he said.

After the opening remarks and presentations, the participants joined guided breakout listening sessions to engage in discussions around barriers to accessing safe, affordable and fair housing, experiences with discrimination or exclusion and local priorities and recommendations for proactively supporting fair housing.

EOHLC has held almost a dozen sessions with more scheduled. The goal of the sessions is to figure out how to prioritize spending the money in the trust fund using the feedback from the community.

Based on that feedback, EOHLC will post request for proposals to address fair housing concerns.

"Housing is the foundation for how we build communities," Demetrius said.