

# Housing bias still problematic

By Shannon Gibney

Special to Sentinel-Voice

MINNEAPOLIS (NNPA)

The message at a recent meeting to discuss housing and communities of color in Minnesota was that Blacks and other people of color face both new and old challenges to receiving equal rental and homeownership opportunities — challenges that are being addressed by a variety of individuals and organizations, but that are, nevertheless, formidable.

"I think that the unfortunate truth is that intentional discrimination in housing remains an enormous problem in the Twin Cities metropolitan region and, of course, beyond," said Colleen Walbran of Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS) in St. Paul. Walbran was speaking to the more than 150 community members and professionals who crowded into a conference room at the Minneapolis Urban League for the meeting.

"At SMRLS and at Minneapolis Legal Aid, we're receiving complaints about intentional discrimination in terms of refusal to rent based on race, national origin, gender and so forth. We see landlords issuing different terms of housing, different lease terms, rent [rates], and so forth. Some also practice selective eviction practices and retaliation," Walbran continued. She went on to cite several local and national studies that found that African-Americans and Latinos experienced housing discrimination more than 50 percent of the time.

Forty-three percent of the 10,000 housing discrimination complaints that HUD and local fair housing agencies receive annually involve racial discrimination.

"In addition to those intentional race discrimination practices that persist as major problems and obstacles for people attaining safe and stable housing, we also receive a lot of complaints about policies that have the effect of denying people housing choice, even if they don't immediately appear to be racist or discriminatory on another protected class basis," said Walbran.

"One that has remained a problem is landlords using restrictive occupancy policies. We're referring to those policies where they limit the number of people per bedroom, oftentimes tighter than the local housing code — for



Would-be minority homeowners complain of rampant discrimination in purchasing efforts.

example, one person per bedroom.

"Well, since certain protected class groups tend to have larger families, the effect of this is discriminatory. Asian-Americans, new immigrants, other populations of color are affected by these types of policies.

"A Wilder study from a few years back, in fact, showed that family size was the reason 15 percent of adults who did not have permanent housing cited as a barrier to them attaining housing. So, occupancy policies remain a problem."

Walbran added that minimum income requirements and policies against accepting rental subsidies are other barriers that can have a discriminatory effect on renters of color.

"One other topic I wanted to touch on, that has particular relevance for the homeless community, would be predatory practices by landlords," said Walbran. "We've received a number of reports about landlords who particularly seek out tenants who are homeless, or who may be living in a homeless shelter, for the purpose of exploiting these tenants, particularly in the sense of sexual harassment — preying upon people who are in a very desperate situation, who need housing more than anything, and then subjecting them to unwelcome sexual advances, offering of sex for rent, or other quid pro quo sexual harassment."

Walbran said that what is needed to combat these disturbing trends is more everyday people taking a strong stand against housing discrimination.

She said, "HUD did a

study and found through their survey that 14 percent of the people that they talked to had experienced housing discrimination. But of the full population of people that experienced housing discrimination, only 17 percent did something about it. And the vast majority of those who did something complained only to the person who had discriminated against them. A very small fraction reported it to a fair housing enforcement agency or sought legal help.

"So, I would urge people to report housing discrimination, to encourage others to report housing discrimination, and to aggressively seek the enforcement of fair housing laws," said Walbran.

Ebony Ruhland, research coordinator at the Council on Crime and Justice in Minneapolis, said that another barrier to fair housing practices has recently emerged in communities of color — the pervasive use of background checks on rental applications.

"We know that African-American males are disproportionately targeted by the police," she said. "They may not even be convicted of a crime, but there will still be a mark against them in their arrest record. Landlords are now doing criminal background checks in almost every case. With the use of technology and the Internet, almost anyone can access that information.

"Our question is, even if someone has been incarcerated and with the number of people coming out of prison, how are they supposed to rehabilitate themselves if the housing they're given is too high, even if they have jobs?"

In order to correct this

trend, Ruhland said that the Council on Crime and Justice is conducting expungement workshop to help people have their arrest records sealed. She said, "At the next legislative session, we're proposing that (1) arrest records should be sealed during background checks, and (2) low-level offenses and petty misdemeanors should be sealed as well.

"We're hopeful. We're in the middle stages. We want to get the community behind (See Homes, Page 5)

## News research firm buys book magazine

By Carla Sander

Special to Sentinel-Voice

CHICAGO (NNPA) — Chicago's Target Market News, Inc. has acquired the nation's top African-American book publishing magazine, *Black Issues Book Review*.

Ken Smikle, CEO of Target Market News, a news and research company specializing in tracking African-American marketing, media and consumer research, told the *Defender* the purchase from Cox, Mathews & Associates Inc. of Fairfax, Va., is in line with the goals of his firm. "The *Black Issues Book Review* is the only voice for African-Americans in the book publishing industry," Smikle said. "It not only gives reviewers information about the latest works from Black authors, but it also talks about the progress and changes at book publishing companies, and about book sellers."

BIRB is a national forum for critical discussion of fiction and nonfiction titles by Black authors. It is the largest literary publication in the U.S. that focuses on African-American authors and other writers.

"Research is the vital component to expanding opportunities for African-Americans in all aspects of book publishing," said Smikle. The acquisition will better position Target Market News "to provide the entire industry with insights on new trends and up-to-date research on African-American book readers."

Cox, Mathews & Associates will focus on its renamed *Black Issues in Higher Education*, a source of news and information for and about all minorities in post-secondary education, now entitled *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*.

"Contrary to what people might say, we do read and read a lot. It's mind-boggling to know how much money Black people really spend on books. The number is huge and growing," said Cox.

Smikle said the magazine will remain in New York — the capital of the book publishing world — and its employees will keep their jobs. Target Market News will expand their offices to include sales and other administrative functions for *Black Issues Book Review*.

Carla Sander writes for the *Chicago Defender*.



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