

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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FRANKLIN COUNTY, CITY OF COLUMBUS PARTNER WITH COLUMBUS URBAN LEAGUE TO PREVENT HOUSING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST GAY AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Backed by historic new federal rules that prohibit landlords and home-loan lenders from discriminating against gay and transgender people, Franklin County Commissioners and the City of Columbus - with support from Columbus City Council - are partnering with the area's two largest local equality organizations to ensure fairer access to the dream of homeownership.

Each year, Franklin County and the City of Columbus invest in the Columbus Urban League to investigate illegal housing discrimination complaints and educate landlords and tenants regarding their rights and responsibilities.

Until this year, the federally-funded Fair Housing program was limited to focusing on discrimination complaints based on race, color, national origin, religion, gender, disability, or family status.

"But now, under new Equal Access rules through U.S. Housing and Urban Development, no one searching for a home in Franklin County can be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity when trying to access HUD-funded programs or federally-insured mortgages," said Franklin County Commissioner Marilyn Brown, who organized a first strategy meeting to begin a concentrated effort on outreach to the area's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community.

County Commissioner Brown and Columbus City Councilmembers Zach Klein and Eileen Paley brought together the Columbus Urban League and Stonewall Columbus - the city's longest-serving GLBT advocacy organization - encouraging both groups to work closer together on fair housing.

"The idea of fair housing for everyone, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation is not a goal, it is a right that must be taken seriously by everyone in Columbus," said Councilmember Klein, chair of the Development Committee. "These educational efforts surrounding this issue will underscore the importance of fair housing in our community."

The new federal rules open access to housing for GLBT individuals and families in four important ways:

First, an equal access provision makes clear that any housing financed or insured by HUD must be made available without regard to actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or marital status.

Second, a new rule prohibits owners and operators of HUD-funded housing, or housing whose financing is federally insured, from inquiring about an applicant's sexual orientation or gender identity or denying housing on that basis.

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Third, the federal rule makes clear that the term “family” includes GLBT individuals and couples as eligible beneficiaries of HUD’s public housing and voucher programs – programs that nationally serve 5.5 million people.

Finally, the new rules make clear that sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be part of any lending decision when it comes to getting a Federal Housing Administration-insured mortgage.

“In Franklin County’s current housing market, these FHA-backed loans play an elevated role,” added County Commissioner Paula Brooks. “So throughout all of Franklin County, this new rule represents a critical step in ensuring that our GLBT residents have the right to live where they choose, raise their families, and contribute to their communities.”

“It’s unfortunate that some have used the narrow definition of ‘family’ as a way to discriminate against renting an apartment or home to gay or transgender couples,” said County Commissioner John O’Grady. “This type of discrimination is very real in Central Ohio and this coordinated effort among Franklin County and our fair housing partners at the federal and local levels is just beginning.”

In addition to investigating illegal housing discrimination complaints and providing counseling to complainants, the Columbus Urban League’s successful Fair Housing program offers homebuyer education services and is drafting the region’s fair housing plan.

“The mission of the League is to advocate for equal and equitable access to those core services essential to the long term stabilization of families in all of our communities,” added Stephanie Hightower, President and CEO of the Columbus Urban League. “We see this effort as an important part of our mission, and plan to work diligently with our partners in support of it.”

Stonewall Columbus continues to be the driving force on GLBT issues in Central Ohio. The Center on High is often the first stop for many in the GLBT and allied community who face discrimination.

While state law fails to protect GLBT people against discrimination, the city of Columbus’ long-standing human rights ordinance does consider sexual orientation and sexual identity. The city ordinance applies to all private landlords and sellers of homes, employers and operators of public accommodations in the city.

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