Realtors: HUD pact boosts fair housing

BY WAYNE PEAL
STAFF WRITER

Studies show metro Detroit is one of the most heavily segregated areas in the U.S., but area Realtors point to a newly-signed agreement as proof of their continuing commitment to fair housing.

A voluntary affirmative marketing agreement — VAMA for short — was signed Wednesday by the Western Wayne Oakland County Association of Realtors and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development regional office.

The agreement is a pledge by Realtors to support fair housing. It also provides guidelines for Realtor training.

Approved by HUD Secretary Jack Kemp in July, the document replaces a previous, 17-year-old agreement between the federal government and housing professionals.

"This is a much simpler document," association spokeswoman Marta Saint-James said. "The older one had some very specific provisions."

Despite its less restrictive nature, Saint-James said the document would prove effective.

She noted, however, that fair housing progress in metro Detroit has been slow.

"Bigotry is still a problem," she said. "You're dealing with people's guts, how they feel inside."

Though it didn't prompt the new agreement, housing segregation has long been a major area issue.

Robert Willis, vice president of the South Oakland NAACP chapter, said "steering" is still a problem.

"I've never been told I couldn't buy a home in a specific neighborhood, but when I was looking to buy a home in Beverly Hills I had a real estate person try to steer me into another area," he said.

Minorities who integrate certain communities still feel a "chilling effect," including cross burnings and additional harassment.

"You're not going to find a lot of African Americans in Dearborn or Sterling Heights," he said. "African Americans don't feel comfortable there."

There were 102 complaints filed with the HUD fair housing office over the past 12 months, including rentals and home sales, office director Ruth Featherstone said.

"That's fairly typical," she said.

Realtors currently receive six hours of training in fair housing law provisions — one hour through the state Department of Commerce, three through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and two more through a Realtors association program called "Project: Pride."

Realtors are members of a trade organization representing about 750,000 real estate professionals nationwide.

Saint-James, a native of Argentina, said fair housing is her personal crusade.

"I've lived all over the world," she said. "In some places, I was in the majority, in others the minority. I know what it feels like."

Open housing center looks for volunteers

The Oakland County Center for Open Housing is sending out this message to suburbanites:

If you care about integration, help us.

For the first time, the two-year-old center seeks suburban volunteers interested in being volunteer welcoming agents for minority group members interested in moving into such Detroit suburbs as Birmingham, Troy, Bloomfield Hills and West Bloomfield.

"It's a new concept for us," spokeswoman Ann Wettlaufer said. "It's something we've always wanted to do but we haven't had the money to do."

The money — $10,000 — is coming from a Kellogg Foundation grant. Some of the money is going toward a bus to help prospective home-buyers tour suburban areas.

"That's something we've never had, either," Wettlauffer said.

The rest is going toward a project coordinator.

The program is initially targeted for the Royal Oak/Hazel Park area, though Wettlaufer said it would soon expand into Troy and "up the Woodward corridor".

Volunteer welcomers will be trained by center staff.

"Many minority group members are apprehensive about moving into the suburbs," Wettlaufer said. "We hope our volunteers will help ease their fears."

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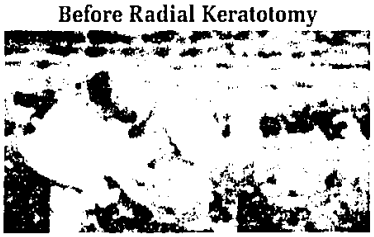

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