

'I have a sense of urgency, but we need to do it right'

Controversy over the city's fair housing audit doesn't sway efforts to push forward on a plan for more tests

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For the past several months, the pendulum has been in full swing over the issue of fair housing discrimination in Portland. It began with a preliminary report from the Fair Housing Council of Oregon (FHCO) indicating rampant discrimination, prompting a demand from the public and media for enforcement and transparency on the information.

Subsequently, Housing Commissioner Nick Fish crafted a Fair Housing Action Plan, unveiled in June with state and federal officials by his side, including Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, with the state Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI), which investigates housing discrimination reports.

Then in August, the BOLI gave an unflattering review of the Fair Housing Council's report, calling into question its practices and results, and ultimately dismissing the one complaint filed against a Portland landlord as a result of the survey. A swing and a miss.

Nonetheless, Fish and his Portland Housing Bureau say they stand by the proposed Fair Housing Action Plan, even as the credibility of the fair housing audit that fueled its creation it has been deemed unreliable by the city. The plan is slated for a vote by the City Council in September.

"If we're serious about ending discrimination, and maintaining the public confidence in our work, we've got to have good reliable data. And that will be one of our first orders of business, once we adopt our fair housing plan, to work with HUD to get better data," Fish said.

"I hope it doesn't cause anyone to believe that there isn't actually a problem (with discrimination)," said Portland Housing Bureau Director Margaret Van Vliet. "I know that there's a big problem out there and I don't want that undermined by this."

On Aug. 23, BOLI dismissed the only complaint by the FHCO resulting from last year's audit of fair housing practices in Portland. BOLI released the decision after a contentious give and take with FHCO over the testing methodology that ultimately implicated Cascade Community Management in treating potential renters differently based on their national origin.

BOLI, the statewide agency that enforces housing law and civil rights, said the testing



in the report "does not rise to a level sufficient for serious consideration of a Commissioner's complaint."

In February, the FHCO presented the city with its results of 50 housing tests. Out of those 50 tests, the Fair Housing Council reported finding discrimination based on race or national origin in more than 32. Among the disparities in treatment were African Americans and Latinos being told higher move-in costs and higher rent, and additional costs that were not applied to white applicants.

When it was disclosed in April, the audit caused a fury among housing advocates and critics alike. Fish came under attack for not releasing the results publicly and the targets of the audit sooner, and for appearing lax on enforcement against the alleged offenders. The results of the survey were turned over to BOLI for further investigation and to determine if they were substantial enough to proceed with a legal case.

By then, the Oregon Senate Republicans had jumped into the fray with a letter to Attorney General John Kroger and Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian calling for more aggressive investigating and prosecuting violations of fair housing laws. Avakian fired back, defending the work of BOLI and FHCO.

In June, in an open meeting at City Hall,

"There has been a lot of misunderstanding about what the original intent of the study was, and what can be done with it now that it has been completed — especially with the public disclosure of who the targets were. That made it harder for us to move forward."

MOLLOY GOOD
FAIR HOUSING COUNCIL OF OREGON

City Commissioner Nick Fish unveiled his new plan. He was joined by Avakian and John Trasvina, the assistant secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity at HUD.

The plan includes a mix of enforcement, education and outreach, coupled with annual fair housing audits covering more protected classes than FHCO's initial survey. All results would be referred to the Civil Rights Division of BOLI for further action. It also includes streamlining the intake and referral process, in collaboration with many organizations and government agencies.

All of this would be overseen by a new

Fair Housing Advocacy Committee, which will review data on rental processes, and ensure that reports and complaints are sent to BOLI for enforcement.

But the thunder behind this plan began to wane after the data and methodology behind the FHCO survey. Among their concerns were that many of the tests were conducted over the phone, were inconsistent with FHCO's own standards, and that they were simply too limited in scope to be conclusive.

By June, only one formal complaint had moved forward to BOLI as a result of the FHCO's survey. And when BOLI and the city raised questions about the methodology of the testing, FHCO refused to turn over the additional documents, saying they included trade secrets. Eventually, BOLI responded on June 22 with a subpoena for the information, with which FHCO complied.

On Aug. 9, the city suspended contract negotiations with FHCO for the coming year.

"Our concerns are based on interactions and communications with staff, feedback from our partners, and a preliminary review of the audit tests and supporting data," wrote Portland Housing Bureau Director Margaret Van Vliet in a letter to FHC Executive Director Moloy Good. Van Vliet said the city had concerns over FHCO's capacity to perform the scope of the work moving forward, and that those concerns have been passed on to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, asking it to provide technical assistance with auditing and capacity building moving forward.

Van Vliet says the city wants to see FHCO brought up to capacity, with proper training, staff and accountability.

"It's in our interest to help this organization be a high-performing nonprofit that serves its public mission," Van Vliet told Street Roots. "We're disappointed in the results, but we're not going to throw them under the bus. We have not given up on them."

(Van Vliet announced on Aug. 12 that she would be leaving the Portland Housing Bureau in September to head up the Oregon Housing and Community Services Department, the state's housing finance agency.)

In the past year, the Fair Housing Council has conducted audits of fair housing

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Veterans Stand Down & Job Fair event, Sept. 20

All veterans and their families are welcome at the Veterans Stand Down & Job Fair — a free event with access to dozens of employers and agencies on Tuesday, September 20th from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. at the Oregon Convention Center. Attendees are urged to bring their resumes; 50-plus employers are expected.

In times of war, Stand Downs were the opportunity for combat units to take time to rest and recover at secure base camp areas. This year, there will be nearly 100 Stand Down events held across the country. Last year, the Portland Stand Down attracted more than 600 veterans.

Portland's Stand Down is organized by Central City Concern in collaboration Department of Veterans Affairs, Returning Veterans, Oregon Paralyzed Veterans of America, WorkSource Oregon and other community organizations. Call Central City Concern at 503-226-7387 or visit www.portlandstanddown.org for more

Veterans educational and organizing resources available

In August, the Veterans for Peace National Conference wrapped up four days of work and networking here in Portland. Here is a list of resources for education and collaboration in reflection of that event:

Military & Draft Counseling Project — War Resisters League Portland: provides free counseling on conscientious objection, selective service requirements, the delayed enlistment program and pre-enlistment; coordinates classroom presentations featuring veterans and military families. Email: contact@wrlpdx.org or phone (503) 238-0605.

Recruiter Watch PDX: educates youth and communities about the realities of war and military life, the fine-print of the military contract and the "poverty draft" and provides alternatives to the military. Contact: rwpdxcoalition@gmail.com

GI Rights Hotline: gives free, private counseling for people wanting out of the military, 1-877-477-4487.

The Ground Truth, dir. Patricia Foulkrod, 2006. 72 min.
Sir! No Sir!, dir. David Zeiger, 2005.
Why We Fight, dir. Eugene Jarecki, 2006.

Books

To End all Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918, Hochschild, Adam (2011)
Road from ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Mejia: An Iraq War Memoir, Mejia, Camilo (2008)
Blood on the Tracks: The Life and Times of S. Brian Willson, Willson, Brian (2011)

Online

Before You Enlist! (14-min video) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcZ7NFrPUg0>
Not Your Soldier - <http://notyoursoldier.org/index.php>
Ya-Ya Network - <http://www.yayanetwork.org/>



Illustrator Tomer Hanuka donated this print to Veterans for Peace with proceeds to go to the organization.