

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 159, No. 231

Ugly isn't pretty: Glenview reacts to changes in fair housing ordinance

Recently, I reported on changes to the Cook County fair housing ordinance making it illegal to refuse to rent to an otherwise qualified tenant because they have a housing voucher.

Refusing to rent to voucher holders is often used as a proxy for race discrimination and adversely impacts families with children, women and persons with disabilities, including veterans and seniors.

Refusing to rent to voucher holders is also an impediment to the promise of integrated housing sought by the Fair Housing Act. Chicago has historically been known for having some of the most segregated housing patterns in the country, and this problem was exacerbated by an inconsistency between the county and city's fair housing laws.

The city's fair housing ordinance prohibits discrimination against voucher holders, but the county's did not, causing voucher holders to be concentrated in economically disadvantaged areas of the county. The amendment to the county ordinance was designed to change that and promote stronger, more integrated communities by removing a big obstacle to broader housing opportunities.

Well, some of the fallout from the change has grown ugly. Shortly before the county changes went into effect, the village of Glenview — an overwhelmingly white, affluent community in northern Cook County — enacted an ordinance designed to nullify the county's action.

Relying on a principle called "home-rule authority" which allows a municipality to pass

laws it determines are necessary to further their operations, Glenview — in direct conflict with the county ordinance — passed an ordinance allowing landlords to refuse to rent to otherwise qualified tenants because they have a housing voucher.

Glenview officials, of course, deny that the purpose of the ordinance was to keep voucher holders out; rather, they say it was enacted to restore a property owner's right to decide whether or not to participate in the federal housing program and to preserve the status quo.

The status quo in Glenview is 86.8 percent Caucasian, median sales price for homes for July 13 to Oct. 13 of \$445,000, average rental price of \$800 to \$1,000 per bedroom and a per capita income of \$43,384, nearly twice the state average.

It is not surprising that Glenview denies that the purpose of passing the ordinance was to keep voucher holders out. That would be too ugly to acknowledge.

In my years as a civil rights lawyer, I've never seen an accused admit to discrimination. The flaws in Glenview's justification are obvious. It is hard to fathom why property owners need "protection" from a program that guarantees timely rental payments.

Although property owners have complained about program administrative requirements in the past, these procedures have been streamlined in recent years and are no longer burdensome, particularly in light of the benefit to the property owner. And, the most important benefit — a less segregated Chicago and Cook County — is priceless and worth any small inconvenience to property owners.

Fair housing advocates were



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so outraged by Glenview's actions that a coalition of organizations — led by Open Communities, a fair housing group in the northern suburbs — wrote to County Board President Toni Preckwinkle on Aug. 27 demanding the county take action against Glenview and withhold its support.

The letter charged Glenview with adopting an ordinance that harms the county's efforts to combat discrimination and that Glenview's actions were based on a misunderstanding that the

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changes in the county's law force landlords to rent to voucher holders.

In fact, the changes only prohibit landlords from treating qualified voucher holders differently than other prospective tenants.

The letter goes on to point out that, ironically, before this issue surfaced, Glenview did not even have a fair housing ordinance.

But to thwart the county's efforts, it hastily passed one. And, in its haste, it forgot to include persons with disabilities as a protected class like every other fair housing law in the country.

The county's response was strong. It said Glenview's actions were an illegal exercise of home-rule authority and urged them to reconsider. It pointed out that the thoughtful study the county engaged in prior to passing the ordinance was in direct contrast to Glenview's "haste makes waste" approach to lawmaking.

It noted how discrimination against voucher holders is often used as a proxy for race and other forms of illegal discrimination and discussed the well-established connection between housing choice and quality of life.

Where you live determines so much about you — education, employment, friends, health care and more. The people of Cook County must be united in the effort to remove barriers to housing choice as much as possible to improve opportunities for everyone.

We don't know yet what Glenview is going to do, but I hope the county stands firm. If Glenview is allowed to get away with this, other communities will do likewise to protect the "status quo." The truth behind Glenview's actions is ugly ... and ugly isn't pretty.