

Color of Law in Rhode Island

Introduction and Thank You

On June 24, 2020, the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Planning Association's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee hosted The Color of Law in RI event inspired by Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated American*. During the virtual "roundtable," five panelists discussed the legacy of past federal housing and land use policies on Rhode Island communities today and took questions from attendees. The panelists offered insights from their experience with these impacts and how their organizations work to reduce inequities.

Thank you to our panel, which included **Angela Ankoma**, Executive Vice President, Director of Community Investment, United Way of RI; **Brenda Clement**, Director, HousingWorksRI at Roger Williams University; **Raymond Neirinckx**, Coordinator, RI Office of Housing and Community Development; and **Jennifer Wood**, Executive Director, Center for Justice.

A special thank you to Krista Moravec for moderating, and to Annette Bourne and the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee for organizing this much-needed conversation.

Recap

The legacy of discriminatory policies Richard Rothstein discussed in the *Color of Law* is alive and well in Rhode Island today. We see it in housing, we see it in the fact that more than 60% of Rhode Islanders of color live in only three out of 39 municipalities, we see it in the education system, and more.

There are lots of tools in the state to address these issues. But they haven't worked. Moving forward, we have to think about whether to sharpen the current tools or create something different.

Now is the time to seize the moment to push for fair share housing to lift up low-moderate income neighborhoods to have successful schools, thriving commercial corridors, and give residents opportunities for economic success.

[How do we gain consensus for policies to integrate communities and dismantle inequality in the state of RI?](#)

To integrate and dismantle inequality in RI, we have to work on a regional solution. Building a cohesive and coherent system starts by reexamining the need for three dozen different school systems, 39 various planning departments, etc. Rethink how the state provides services and providing incentives for moving away from the status quo. Furthermore, litigating for fair

housing has to continue because local zoning dictates what type of housing is built in a community. There is also a need to continue educating people to combat NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) mentalities.

Next Steps:

- Work on a more regional solution
- Continue to litigate for fair housing
 - Need politicians who are knowledgeable and care about fair housing issues in the General Assembly
- Combat NIMBYism through education

How do we advocate for a more integrated and equitable society through housing and land use policy and ameliorate the legacy of suburban white flight?

To use housing and land use policies to create a more integrated and equitable RI, we need political leaders to understand the issues, and intentionally work to fix them. Residents also have to get involved in the planning process by going to public meetings to support affordable housing developments, especially residents in marginalized communities who are the most impacted and hard to reach. There is also a need to find more people from marginalized communities to be in decision-making positions. Lastly, we have to take these conversations to the suburbs to show the people that segregation in RI did not happen by accident. Therefore, we have to be intentional about mitigation and build allies who want to see a more functional and equitable RI.

Next Steps:

- Persuade political leaders to support a diversity of housing
- Get more people who support these issues to public meetings and on planning and zoning boards
- Take these issues outside the urban core

Is increased affordable housing the best way to address the legacy of racism, inequality, and segregation in our communities?

Affordable Housing is something that can be controlled locally. Therefore, it could be used as a starting point to address the legacy of racism, inequality, and segregation in RI. Cities and towns can be more involved in addressing the issue by identifying sites that are abandoned or underutilized and look at ways to repurpose them for housing as well as looking at defunct nursing homes and congregate settings to redevelop as housing for workers as well as residents.

The reality is that people will seek housing where it is available, affordable, and in good condition. The fact that over 60% of RI residents of color reside in three of the state's 39 municipalities did not happen by accident or on the notion that people want to live near people that look like themselves. It is a strategic practice that stems from historical racism that continues to lead to segregation and inequality in the state. To combat this, we have to recognize the problem and work to address it.

Additionally, conversations such as these must happen outside the urban core to give people space to learn and discuss issues such as racism and segregation that contribute to the inequalities in RI.

Next Steps:

- Empower the Narragansett Tribe with resources and partnerships throughout RI to increase homeownership and rental opportunities
- Initiate conversations such as this throughout RI

What Role Should Community Advocates Play in Increasing Awareness of Housing Discrimination?

We have to move beyond silos and look at housing holistically. To have successful housing, you have to have access to successful schools, healthy foods, open space and recreation, good jobs, and quality healthcare. Approaching these issues with equity in mind allows us to reinvest dollars to improve disparities and create strong neighborhoods.

Other Thoughts

Below are comments and questions that do not fall under the questions above.

When talking about ways to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing in urban areas, we should bring educational institutions to the table to work on affordable housing for students and people who work for them.

Resources

- Southcoastfairhousing.org
- The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: <http://www.pruitt-igoe.com/>
- Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route: <https://www.pbs.org/video/detroit-48202-conversations-along-a-postal-route-tzx2ee/>
- Decade of Fire: <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/decade-of-fire/>
- East Lake Meadows: A History of Public Housing: <https://www.pbs.org/show/east-lake-meadows/>
- [Charette High School](#)