

Unfair housing practices examined

A hearing here focuses on ads that discriminated after Hurricane Katrina

By JENNIFER LATSON Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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The apartment listings began, "I'm not a racist, but ... "

"That's always a bad start," said James Perry, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center.

The listings, which cropped up on Web sites meant to help New Orleans evacuees find housing after Hurricane Katrina — one of them a site created by FEMA — went on to justify a desire for exclusively white tenants.

In the early months after the storm, Perry compiled 28 pages of discriminatory listings from five housing Web sites. By December 2005, he had filed complaints against all five sites with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which enforces fair housing laws. Those cases are still pending.

"Three years later, cases where people say, 'I'm not a racist, but whites only,' still haven't been dealt with," Perry said in testimony Thursday before the National Commission on Fair Housing.

The hearing, held at the Westin Oaks Hotel in the Galleria, focused on the Gulf Coast housing crisis in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Houston is one of five cities where the commission has scheduled hearings before making a presentation to Congress in December on the state of fair housing enforcement.

Housing advocates said Katrina exacerbated and exposed systemic segregation and discriminatory housing practices that flourished long before the hurricane hit.

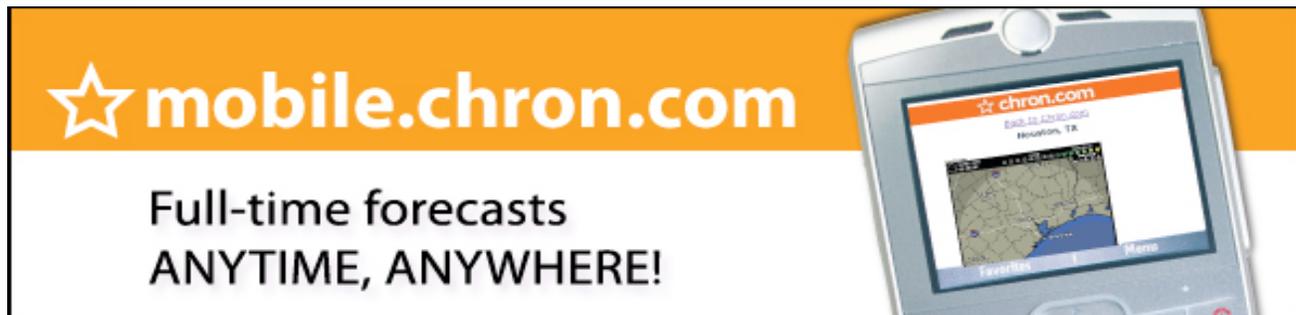
"It forced much of the country to learn what was happening in the Lower Ninth Ward before Katrina," said John Payton, president of the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund. "Then we saw what happened afterward ... the demolition, displacement and dispersal of whole communities of color by Katrina."

Local policies, such as a rule drafted just after the storm in St. Bernard Parish, a predominantly white suburb of New Orleans, subtly segregated communities. Parish officials made it illegal for residents to rent to anyone not related to them by blood. With 93 percent of single-family homes owned by whites, it effectively stopped black evacuees from settling there.

Perry's agency challenged the law, which was ultimately overturned. But federal housing authorities were slow to correct abuses, advocates said.

Workers with the National Fair Housing Alliance investigated apartment complexes in Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Florida and Tennessee, where

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the greatest influx of Katrina evacuees sought refuge. They found that the majority of black would-be renters faced discrimination when compared with white counterparts.

In 43 out of 65 test cases, black families were denied apartments or quoted higher rents than equally qualified white families, who were offered apartments or given lower rents and other discounts on the same day.

The housing agency filed complaints in the seven most egregious cases, said Cathy Cloud, the agency's senior vice president. All but one have languished in the hands of HUD officials, Cloud said.

Advocates say the lack of enforcement violates the spirit of the Fair Housing Act, a 40-year-old federal law meant to end injustice in the housing market.

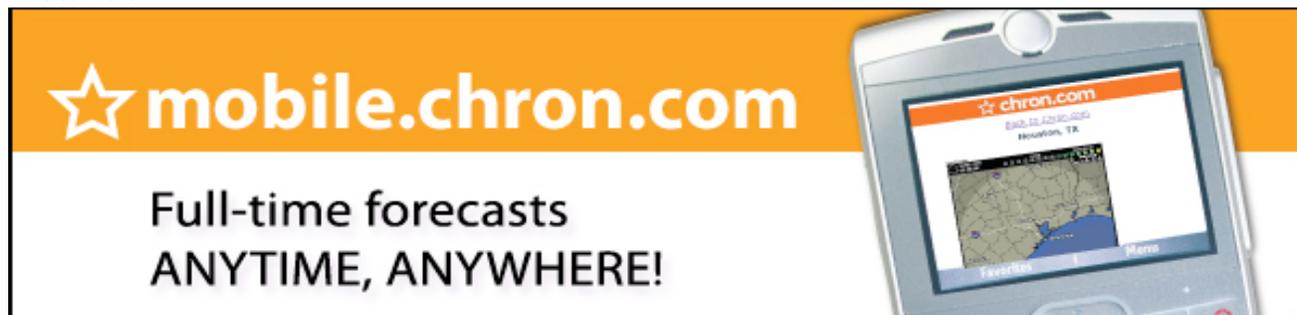
"The government entities charged with protecting citizens engaged in discriminatory practices," said Perry. "It was private nonprofits that had to take the lead in challenging these issues."

Commission members plan to lobby for change when they present their report to Congress.

"There will be change," said commission member Barbara Arnwine, executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. "We can go nowhere but up."

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