

Testimony of Estela Lopez in Support of H.B. 7279
Before the Planning & Development Committee of the Connecticut Legislature
Wednesday, March 22, 2017

In 1961, my family was forced to leave Cuba for political reasons. My father went to work in New York City while the rest of the family stayed in Miami to wait for the end of the school year and to save money for winter clothes. My father lived in midtown Manhattan in a cheap room with a shared bathroom in the hallway. He worked two jobs: delivering papers in the morning to Wall Street businesses, and as an accountant at an insurance company. As my parents planned to reunite the family at the end of June, my father faced the challenge of finding housing for us.

He made a crucial decision that changed my life – even though I did not realize it until much later. He talked to friends and relatives regarding where it would be appropriate for us to live and feel safe. He visited several places and was torn between an apartment in Flushing and the other in Kew Gardens, both in Queens. Kew Gardens won and my parents stayed there till the end of their lives. Even though the apartment was far away from the subway station — which meant taking a bus or walking over a mile to get to work — it was near a beautiful park and there were a mix of people of various incomes, many of them immigrants like us: Cubans, Puerto Rican, Russian Jews, and others. My girlfriends came from Argentina, Ecuador, Holland, and several were African American. The neighborhood was safe, and we could walk at night without fear of being attacked or robbed.

My father did not know that the neighborhood determined which school we would be assigned to. But he understood the importance of safety above convenience, of clean parks and streets.

My brother, my cousin, and I ended up graduating from Richmond Hill H.S. Our public high school was not exceptional, but it did not harm or limit us, and it provided the basics we needed: All three of us went on to college and two of us obtained PhDs.

I have always believed that my success and opportunities in this country were attributable to my access to a solid education, and this fundamental belief has driven my passion to eliminate the achievement gap. Research resoundingly confirms the importance of good teachers, a solid curriculum, an appropriate cultural environment in school as well as other factors that are connected to the school setting. However, it is only more recently that I have begun to understand how segregated housing is a significant “missing” piece of the achievement gap. If we want better educational outcomes, then housing segregation - racial, ethnic, and economic - must be addressed.

Today, it is much too hard for families to find places like this to live in Connecticut. We live in one of the most racially, ethnically and economically segregated states in the country. We also

know that schools where the children have the widest achievement gaps are in predominantly segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods, particularly in struggling inner cities.

Although we continue to think there will be a magic solution to eliminating this gap, it is more productive to understand that it is the result of a combination of elements, including segregated housing and neighborhoods. Providing affordable housing both in the cities and in the suburbs so that people can have real choice regarding where to live and where to go to school is one of the most critical strategies to ensuring better school choices and outcomes.

While investing in under-resourced communities, Connecticut needs to take critical steps to improve access to affordable housing in thriving communities. We have the chance to do that through House Bill 7297. This proposal provides, first, for a basic assessment of the need for affordable housing throughout the state. Through providing this core government function, the state can conduct more meaningful planning for our future housing needs in manner that counteracts segregation. This is a basic building block of a larger equitable housing strategy.

Second, this bill restores enforceability to a central housing civil rights law that provides the state with guidance on how to administer funding in a way that reverses segregation. This means ensuring geographically-balanced housing investments across the state and appropriate non-housing investments in under-resourced areas.

These are just two steps necessary to support a diverse and vibrant state. This initiative could be more comprehensive if it also included an expansion of housing authority jurisdiction, clear and balanced geographic goals for the location of government housing investments, support for strategies to better connect low income children of color to high performing schools, and adjustments to existing homeownership programs enabling them to bring income diversity to struggling communities.

Once in a while I visit my old Kew Gardens neighborhood, including the cemetery where my mother is buried. It is only recently that I have realized that what saved me from the challenges of leaving behind everything and moving to a new country was my neighborhood, the friends I made, the safety that I felt, the opportunities others had that were shared with me and the support network that my family was able to build. My parents were able to make a choice about where we would live – and that decision opened the door to a better life for all of us. Let's do the same for all the children of Connecticut.