



*Testimony of Constance Royster in Support of H.B. 7297, An Act Establishing a Private Right of Action in the Duty to Promote Fair Housing and Requiring a Study of Connecticut's Housing Inventory and Current and Future Housing Needs
Wednesday, March 22nd, 2017*

Good afternoon members of the Housing Committee. My name is Constance Royster. I live in Bethany, CT, and I have also lived in Ridgefield and New Haven. I am a member of the Board of Open Communities Alliance (OCA), a non-profit civil rights organization that focuses on ensuring that low-income families of color have access to the wealth of opportunities in our state through a balanced approach to affordable housing creation, and now chair the board. I am here today to testify in favor of House Bill 7297, an Act Establishing a Private Right of Action in the Duty to Promote Fair Housing and Requiring a Study of Connecticut's Housing Inventory and Current and Future Housing Needs.

What I would like to offer today is a sense of context. We know that Connecticut is one of our nation's most segregate states – and that this segregation was partly the result of intentional government housing policies. We have the power to change this. The question is whether we have the will.

Because racial segregation is closely tied to economic segregation, the status quo results in deep poverty concentration. Concentrated poverty is expensive, which is reflected in our state's budget projections. It also places a heavy cost on communities of color – and people of color who would like housing opportunities all across the state. Children in predominately white communities do not get to experience the diversity that represents the work places of the future. As a state, we also experience the loss of opportunity. A child with the aptitude to cure cancer, solve the world's energy problems, or boldly lead our nation, could be living in circumstances where that promise will never be realized.

I was born and raised in the New Haven area, went to college there, and returned to Connecticut to work at Yale and to raise my family. Some, I hope most, of you know the name Constance Baker Motley. Now deceased, she was my aunt. She was a groundbreaking civil rights lawyer born and raised in Connecticut, and the first African-American woman federal judge. She's inducted in the Connecticut Hall of Fame just down the hall from this hearing. Not only was she on the brief in *Brown v. Board of Education*, but she litigated many major civil cases involving education, transportation, accommodations, and housing. She was our role model and, yes, I am her namesake. I am here because segregation in any form is not acceptable. When Judge Motley boarded the train to New Haven to attend college at Fisk University she was shocked by her experience of segregation. She would be equally shocked and sadden to know that there are communities in Connecticut, decades after her work, that

are as segregated now as they were during her own experiences as a student and a lawyer in the south. I am here because she inspired us to serve and to give back.

H.B. 7297 offers some very common sense proposals to address racial isolation. This includes greater guidance on the core government functions of housing data collection and needs assessment, and a technical fix for our state affirmatively furthering fair housing law to grant it the enforceability granted to other housing-related civil rights. Together, these proposals will put us on the road to a more financially sustainable and universally diverse Connecticut.