

Testimony of Amber Townsend 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 morning, Chairs and Ranking Members, and members of the Planning and Development Committee. My name is Amber Townsend, and while I am originally from Chicago, I am currently a student at Trinity College in Hartford studying Educational Studies.

In 1952 my grandmother moved from Hazlehurst, Mississippi to Chicago as part of the Great Migration, looking for greater opportunity for her family. Four decades later, I was born into a working class family on Chicago's West Side. I grew up in a neighborhood with high levels of crime and poverty. Every morning during my elementary and middle school years, I would wake up around 6 am and take the school bus two hours across Chicago in order to attend an excellent school. In the event that I missed my bus, I would either have to miss school (because my mother had to be at work) or my mother would ride the city bus ride with me so that I could make it to school.

As a kid, I remember wondering about the stark contrast between my neighborhood and the neighborhood surrounding my school. In my neighborhood, I would see abandoned houses, crowded and crumbling apartment complexes, dirty streets and sidewalks, people of all ages strung out on hard drugs near the bus stops and methadone clinic, prostitutes walking up and down the block, as well as adults headed to work on public transportation. In the area surrounding my school huge mansion-like homes, and brand new condominiums sat comfortably near Lake Michigan, surrounded by small boutiques and grocery stores with locally grown organic foods. The streets were extremely clean with no cracks in the concrete. In the morning, I would see people walking their dogs, riding their bikes, jogging or heading to work in their shiny suits and leather briefcases. I wondered every day how two groups of people with whom I had such close contact, could have such different lifestyles.

Now, as a student at Trinity College, I see these stark neighborhood differences between Connecticut neighborhoods. The people in Hartford remind me so much of my family and neighbors from back home. I see the all too familiar signs of stratification and discrimination all around me here in Connecticut. I walk my dog in Hartford's North End where the sidewalks are paved with trash and broken glass. Many of my friends who grew up in the North End feel hopeless about their future and their children's future. They fear that the cycle of poverty which has plagued their family for generations will not only continue, but worsen with the generations to come. This is simply unacceptable.

I know now how our segregated living patterns unfolded, from the Great Migration to redlining and racial covenants, to the more subtle forces of today that keep us separate. Our history is so full of intentional efforts that ensured residential segregation by race it is now incumbent upon us to take intentional steps to turn the tide – to ensure fair and equal access to all neighborhoods in Connecticut, particularly for Blacks and Latinos who, due to our legacy of segregation and discrimination, are disproportionately low income, and therefore have a greater need for affordable housing.

So much needs to be done to redress the history that has brought us to this place, but the first step is to understand the state of affordable housing today. We need to know the demand for affordable housing at different income levels and where the government subsidized housing, which often ends up in struggling communities, is located. Then, we must set goals to offer greater choices in housing and a way to measure our success.

These are the goals of House Bill 7297. This bill would help Connecticut fulfill its obligations under new rules from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and allow for critical, and potentially transformative, housing planning so there is a fair distribution of subsidized housing around the state. In addition, the legislation bolsters a core housing civil rights law critical to ensuring that the state works to intentionally counteract the forces of segregation.

The violence and fear that characterized my life in Chicago come directly from a history of discrimination and segregation, and many of Connecticut's people of color face the same fears in their everyday lives. For us, fair housing is about more than equality. It's a matter of survival.