

A STATEMENT ON HOUSING POLICY

CITY COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
OF NEW YORK



The following is a reprint of an address by Mayor Robert F. Wagner, delivered at the Joint Conference of the National and New York State Committees Against Discrimination in Housing at the Park Lane Hotel, October 12, 1956.

The City Commission on Human Rights accepts this document as a basic statement of policy and an official charge to achieve a truly open city—a city in which all families may bargain competitively for available housing with the knowledge that none shall be barred the right to seek shelter because of race, color, religion or ethnic origin.

STANLEY H. LOWELL
Chairman

IN BEHALF of the people of New York City, I take particular pleasure in greeting this Joint Conference of the National and New York State Committees Against Discrimination in Housing. Your cooperation with members of the State Legislature and the City Council has been largely responsible for the enactment of comprehensive statutes prohibiting discrimination in publicly-aided housing because of race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry. Your consistent collaboration with the Office of the Mayor and City agencies responsible for administration of these housing programs has served to assist in the day to day implementation of these statutes.

We believe our town provides an especially apt forum in which to consider your program and policies for the year ahead. This is so, first, because we are able to cite with you distinctive achievements in the attainment of non-discrimination in publicly-assisted housing, and secondly, we are concerned as you are with the ways and means to meet new problems which have arisen to challenge our pre-eminence as a City with truly democratic living patterns.

We early realized that the fundamental approach to the elimination of discrimination in housing was and is the production of large supplies of new dwellings for families of low and moderate incomes and the opening up of new and old housing to families of all racial and ethnic groups in accordance with their need and ability to pay. In the face of all types of difficulties, we have driven ahead with the building of low rent and middle income housing. We have used all types of Federal, State and local aids, and discovered new ones; we have had the aid of unions, profit and non-profit corporations, private foundations, cooperatives. These thousands of new dwellings every year come under the jurisdiction of our public policy requiring non-discrimination. In the implementation of this policy, the City Housing Authority and other municipal agencies have attained a high measure of success in assuring equal opportunity to all residents to live in decent, sanitary and healthful living quarters. Our City thereby has helped to establish the fact that families of various racial, ethnic and

religious backgrounds may live as neighbors in mutual respect and harmony. We have been able to utilize governmental aids and powers to assure to minority group families in publicly-assisted housing that which was and still is denied them in private housing—the right to bargain for shelter in an open market.

WE HAVE come to recognize, however, that in the face of recent population shifts in our city, the general application of non-discrimination in the selection of tenants may still result in *de facto* segregation in publicly-assisted housing which is also prohibited by the laws and public policy of this city. In response to job opportunities, the numbers of our Negro, Puerto Rican and other racial and ethnic group citizens have rapidly increased. Private housing, new or old, is not freely available to them in all parts of the city; this results in heavy concentration of these families in those sections of the city which are open to them. Further, these same over-crowded neighborhoods have generally been the ones designated for clearance and redevelopment. Displaced low-income families are granted tenant selection priority by law in public housing; the other relocatees must be absorbed in private housing in those sections where they are accepted.

Early in August, your State Committee cited the fact that the location of publicly-assisted housing within such neighborhoods of minority concentration could but serve to effect *de facto* racial or ethnic segregation in spite of, or even as the result of, the enforcement of non-discrimination regulations in the selection of tenants. You suggested site selection principles, the further exploration of management techniques to achieve integration, and you recommended that, for the next two years, we avoid the clearance of minority slums for the development of publicly-assisted housing. Your Committee and other groups have cited the inordinate impact upon minority group families, small businesses and churches of displacement and relocation associated with slum clearance. As the result of our discussion in August, I appointed an interdepartmental committee for further study and recommendations to me. My statement to you tonight is based upon the findings of that Committee. In addition, representatives of your New York State Committee have held a number of conferences with the New York City Housing Authority relative to racial aspects of

site selection and the application of management techniques to achieve integration. I trust that those conferences will continue and achieve productive working agreements. In addition, I anticipate and urge your holding such conferences with other city departments concerned with the planning and production of housing, with clearance and redevelopment and with the relocation of families.

Further, in the matter of relocation, the Board of Estimate at my suggestion issued a set of seven principles to guide relocation in the effectuation of the Lincoln Square Project. It is our intent that these principles will serve as guides to assure the best possible job of relocation wherever displacement of families and businesses is involved. We ask your careful appraisal of these principles and your cooperation in attaining their consistent application and improvement.

In reference to sites for publicly-assisted housing developments, we have consistently sought to utilize open land wherever feasible. A considerable proportion of the public housing program has been developed on vacant sites. However, the really available supply of such land diminishes with the expansion of the city. In some areas, we are faced with local community opposition to the use of vacant land for public housing. The cooperation of your constituent organizations in various parts of the city could prove helpful in the reorientation of neighborhood and borough-wide attitudes in this regard. Our City Housing agencies will continue to exert every effort to utilize vacant land in every possible instance and confer carefully with public interest groups and the Commission on Intergroup Relations* wherever racial and ethnic considerations are involved in clearance operations.

IN ORDER that we may avoid racial or ethnic segregation or other forms of discrimination I am calling upon our City Commission on Intergroup Relations, working in association with my office and the City Planning Commission, to consult with city agencies concerned with the planning, site selection, development, marketing, tenanting and management of housing accommodations and associated facilities. The purpose will be to recommend any shifts in emphasis or adaptations of policy and procedure to assure the maintenance and extension of sound, democratic living patterns wherever public assistance is

*Since March 1962, the City Commission on Human Rights (CCHR).

involved. I will expect that the Commission will also help to mobilize community resources for the wide interpretation of the city's objectives. In this regard, its work will parallel and complement the work of the Commission on Integration now at work in the Board of Education to effect the integration of public schools. The relation of schools, neighborhood and housing are inextricably intertwined.

THROUGH these steps, we should be able to continue to assure that public-assisted housing will make its measure of contribution to a truly integrated city. The chief obstacle to the attainment of this goal, however, lies in the practices of the owners and managers of private housing, new and existing. This housing is not subject to anti-discrimination housing laws although it constitutes the major proportion of the city's dwelling accommodations. In our efforts to clear slums and renew areas of our city, these restrictions in the housing market prevent the free movement of our families of different backgrounds in accordance with their desires and ability to pay. Numerous analyses by governmental and private organizations have found that racial discrimination and segregation in housing constitute a major barrier to city improvement. The tenant relocation report of the City Planning Commission adopted by the Board of Estimate in January 1954, and the report of the Mayor's Committee for Better Housing of June 1955, documented this finding. There is wide agreement also that housing discrimination provides a sharp focus for intergroup tension and conflict which are detrimental to sound relationships between groups in our city.

The Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Law, enacted by the City Council in 1951, declared that any discrimination and segregation in housing is against public policy. In Local Law No. 55, which took effect July 1, 1955, the City Council found that "discrimination" threatens the rights and privileges of the city's inhabitants and "menaces the institutions of a free democratic state." The Council defined "discrimination" as "any difference in treatment based on race, creed, color, national origin and ancestry and shall include segregation." This law created the Commission on Intergroup Relations as a city department to eliminate "discrimination" whether it be effected by public agencies or private corporations, groups, or individuals. It is clear that private

as well as public housing falls within this jurisdiction. I shall, therefore, expect that the Commission working in association with my office and in cooperation with other city departments shall take every step within its power to attain the cooperation of private builders, lenders and real estate interests with the city's open housing policy. I am asking that the Commission, based on its negotiations and findings, will recommend to me any additional administrative or legislative steps found necessary to apply the city's declared open housing policy to the private housing supply.¹

THE OBJECTIVE of this city's policy is clearly that every resource and facility of the city and its departments be utilized in every possible way to remove from the housing supply any restrictions based upon race, religion and national origin. As a matter of morality as well as law, all New Yorkers must have the right to bargain for their shelter in a freely open, competitive housing market. Our effort is to establish the right and the opportunity of anyone to live in any neighborhood or move to any other neighborhood as his desire and income may dictate.

As our city departments apply the policies and practices I have outlined to achieve the public policy reaffirmed herein, we shall not find it necessary to deprive any neighborhood of the opportunity for redevelopment. Instead, we should drive ahead, full speed, with the development of housing to meet the needs of all of our people, clear slums, and renew neighborhoods in all parts of the city. Our city has led the nation in its adoption and implementation of non-discrimination requirements in the selection of tenants for publicly-assisted dwellings. We ask the continued cooperation of governmental agencies and private organizations to help us accept the higher challenge of a free, open, integrated city. Our appeal is for the fundamental property rights of all individuals, the sanctity of law and the highest morality of man's relation to man. I will anticipate that you of the State Committee on Discrimination in Housing will be with us in this fight for the duration.

1. In December, 1957 the City of New York enacted the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs law, prohibiting discrimination in all private multiple dwellings and in one or two family homes which are built in developments of 10 or more houses. The Law was later amended to cover all private housing in New York City, except in apartments or houses in which the owner or owners continue to reside.

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