



## Why Communities of Color Challenged a Fair Housing Complaint and What We Learned

Equity in Place is a diverse group of strategic partners from place-based, housing, and advocacy organizations working to ensure that everyone in the Twin Cities region has access to opportunity regardless of where they live.

Since 2012, we have made major strides in influencing how public resources are invested in Twin Cities communities—particularly in communities of color. We have built power by working in a cross-geographical collaboration and engaging in complicated government processes to call out white supremacy in the way decision-making is structured. When our metropolitan planning agency had to complete a federally required assessment of opportunity in the Twin Cities region, we were there to name structural racism as a barrier to opportunity. We fought for the assessment to include an analysis of how decades of government policy led to racial segregation and concentrated poverty. We established ourselves as experts on regional policy, on racial disparities, and on the needs and concerns of our communities.

So when a group of faith-based and neighborhood organizations filed a federal Fair Housing complaint in 2015, we immediately took interest. The complaint alleged that the Twin Cities region was using federal housing funding to concentrate affordable housing in high-poverty communities that had already absorbed a significant amount of the region's affordable housing, thereby violating their obligation to "affirmatively further Fair Housing." It came as no surprise to the members of Equity in Place that these high-poverty communities deemed as receiving too much federal housing funding were communities of color.

## Equity in Place's Analysis



To some, the Fair Housing complaint may have sounded like it had racial equity at its core. But Equity in Place immediately recognized deep problems with its premise.

1. The complaint assumed that affordable housing investments contribute to too many people of color living in poor communities. It ignored the historical and present-day institutional and structural racism that forced people of color into those communities.
2. The complaint implied that concentrations of people of color were a problem. It also overlooked the fact that some communities of color in the region are extremely racially diverse.
3. The complaint seemed indifferent to the fact that many communities in the region held significant concentrations of affluent white people—this type of racial concentration was not named as a problem.
4. The complaint constituted another example of decisions being made about communities of color without input from or consultation with communities of color.

We decided to challenge the complaint and create our own narrative and agenda about how to prioritize housing investments in the region. Over the past year, we asserted

pressure to ensure the voices of communities of color will influence how federal housing funds are invested in the Twin Cities region. What we learned can benefit other organizers, advocates, and funders who are thinking about how to build power to create more equitable investments and outcomes for communities of color.

## What We Learned

Although the problem facing the Twin Cities region was specific to the local context, what Equity in Place learned can be applied in many different organizing and advocacy campaigns to secure better outcomes for people of color. Here are the top 10 lessons from the campaign:

- **Long-term, cross-geographic engagement builds power:** Equity in Place had years of experience working together and building credibility with government decision-makers before the Fair Housing complaint. Over the course of three years, we inserted ourselves into status-quo government processes and challenged officials to better involve and reflect the concerns of affected community members. Our work is unique because we unite the voices of communities of color across the region to create better policies for all of us. When communities of color in the suburbs are being attacked, urban allies are there to help and vice versa. Instead of moving on after we achieve a victory, we move forward together and keep building our credibility and power.
- **Information is power:** Most residents of any community think housing choices are important, but too often institutions and systems make it difficult for everyone to understand how funding is allocated to competing housing developments. Such a complex allocation of resources almost always slides under the radar—unless diligent community organizations organize to inform residents. Equity in Place members took on the arduous task of following this complex decision-making process related to the Fair Housing complaint every step of the way. We attended every critical meeting and kept one another up-to-date with new developments. When opportunities and challenges arose, we were well informed about the issues and knew how we could influence the outcome.

# CONSIDER OUR VOICES

We demand that we be given real, equitable housing choices, both where we live and in other neighborhoods and communities. We oppose complaints filed and policies made that force us to move based on lack of affordable units in communities where we currently reside.

We disagree with the idea that our neighborhoods with higher numbers of people of color be called “low-opportunity” by people who do not live here.

We are significantly concerned that the current HUD Complaint will limit the production and preservation of affordable housing in our neighborhoods. We are especially concerned when attempts to do so do not include the voices and opinions of those who will be most affected.

We believe that the Fair Housing Complaints filed to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) do not speak for us, reinforce negative stereotypes about people of color, renters, those of us living in “affordable housing,” and may lead to further disinvestment and displacement in our communities. We do not support them.



We believe the Fair Housing Complaints filed go against a key commitment stated in the HUD Rule on Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing: “...this rule helps to facilitate communities relying on local knowledge and local decision-making to determine best strategies for meeting their fair housing obligations at the local level – including making place based investments to revitalize distressed areas, or expanding access to affordable housing throughout a community.”



*Urban Homeworks, Equity in Place, and community members sent a thousand copies of this postcard to HUD.*

- **Informed community members spur action:** Equity in Place organizers didn’t keep information to themselves—we told our communities and asked them to raise their voices in opposition to the complaint. One member, Urban Homeworks, learned about the complaint and reflected on its implications for communities of color. Urban Homeworks staff worked with Equity in Place allies to create a postcard naming concerns people of color had about the complaint. We organized 1,000 community members to send the postcard to HUD. The postcards became a constant reminder that the community was watching.
- **Elected officials can change their minds:** The Fair Housing complaint was a complex and nuanced issue. Equity in Place members found that many of our elected officials had endorsed the complaint because it had been pitched to them as a civil rights or Fair Housing issue. That sounded good, but it didn’t reflect the fact that many people of color want to live in communities of color where we have family, history, and other ties. We needed to tell our story. We

met with state legislators, HUD staff, and members of Minnesota's congressional delegation. We reminded them that many people of color want to stay in place and have more access to opportunity where we already live. We were powerful and united in these meetings. Many elected officials and federal stakeholders were shocked to learn that many people of color had these strong concerns about the complaint's implications.

- **Federal decision-makers have local influence too:** The Fair Housing complaint was ultimately a federal issue, so we also had to build our influence beyond local stakeholders. Equity in Place members strengthened our relationships with HUD regional staff and even with then-HUD Secretary Julian Castro. When the secretary came to the Twin Cities to meet with the complainants, Equity in Place members worked with U.S. Congressman Keith Ellison's office to arrange our own meeting with him. We established ourselves as stakeholders who would not and could not be ignored in any Fair Housing process in the Twin Cities.
- **Demand a seat at the table:** The formal decision-making process about the Fair Housing complaint would likely have happened without participation from community leaders if we hadn't demanded seats at the table. In response to mounting pressure from Equity in Place and the deluge of postcards arriving in Chicago, HUD announced that it would create a Fair Housing Advisory Council (FHAC) to make recommendations about the complaint—but that proposed process still didn't include community-based organizations with on-the-ground connections to people of color. We had to step in and challenge HUD's business-as-usual approach once again. We demanded that community organizations have seats on the FHAC to represent themselves and to challenge the problematic narratives elevated in the complaint. In response to our concerns, HUD allocated four seats to community-based organizations, which were filled by Equity in Place members, and an additional two seats for community members.
- **Establish rules of engagement:** Securing seats at the FHAC was just the first step. Equity in Place still had to fight to be treated fairly at that table. As soon as the FHAC meetings began, other members started to push boundaries. Equity in

Place members had to hold committee members accountable to enforcing the group's rules of engagement. For example, early in the process an academic researcher who was not a FHAC member spoke out of turn at a meeting. We objected and argued that his participation violated protocol. It may not have seemed like a problem to many in the room, but Equity in Place members had fought for more than a year to be named to the committee. The goal was not to be dogmatic or to single out this individual, but rather to demonstrate how privilege operates in rooms where powerful people gather. Some people are allowed to break the rules while other people have to fight to even be at the table. We set a precedent that the FHAC would have to adhere to new, equity-minded standard operating procedures.

- **Call out racism and privilege:** Throughout our time on the FHAC, Equity in Place members noticed a pattern of members of the committee voicing problematic viewpoints on communities of color. We called out our concerns in real time so that people could learn from their mistakes. When we tired of this, we suggested that the entire FHAC undergo Undoing Racism training. We asked HUD to pay for a two-day training and we chose the trainer. This further established us as experts on combating racism and uncovering the insidious ways white privilege influences decision-making.
- **Offer new ideas:** Equity in Place knew that the same old ways of working—even with new minds at the table—would not produce different results. Instead of improving stale processes, we suggested innovative strategies. For example, we learned that there was a select group of consultants who completed most of the Fair Housing analyses around the country. Because of the limited number of people involved, analyses from different regions often looked very similar to one another. We wanted a different outcome, so we insisted on direct engagement with communities of color. We secured public funding for micro-grants to engage people of color in identifying housing barriers in their communities. With more local control and less reliance on generic narratives, we could better challenge the complaint's narrative that segregation was the main Fair Housing issue in the region. Instead, we elevated the real concerns of people of color.

- **Position community members as experts:** Just as we provided new information to residents, we also recognized that community members hold their own knowledge, experience and expertise. We brought ideas and concerns from community members into public processes where their voices had historically been absent and demanded that decision-makers listen. We reminded decision-makers that expertise on communities of color should always come from communities of color.

## The Result

Equity in Place challenged the Fair Housing complaint and successfully organized to combat the damaging narratives it offered about the Twin Cities region's communities of color. We advocated for an advisory committee to oversee decisions about the complaint, organized for Equity in Place to control four seats at that table, secured two additional seats for community-based organizations, ensured decision-makers attended an anti-racism training, and shifted the prevailing narrative that to overcome poverty, low-wealth people of color must be relocated to more affluent, white communities. Today, government leaders working on Fair Housing issues in the Twin Cities have a better understanding of the overt and covert ways racism has guided development decisions in the region. Many of these leaders now have better skills and tools to advance equitable decisions in the future.

Equity in Place is also ready to continue fighting for better outcomes for our communities. We have relationships. We have trust. We have knowledge. We have power and influence. We are fighting for a more equitable Twin Cities region.



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**Equity in Place is a coalition convened and organized by the Alliance. Members include:**

African Career, Education, and Resources, Inc  
American Indian Family Center  
Asamblea de Derechos Civiles  
Center for Urban and Regional Affairs  
Community Stabilization Project  
Frogtown Neighborhood Association  
Hope Community  
Housing Justice Center

Jewish Community Action  
Minnesota Consortium of Community Developers  
Minnesotans Standing Together to End Poverty  
Native American Community Development Institute  
New American Academy  
Urban Homeworks  
Voices for Racial Justice

For further information about Equity in Place, visit [www.TheAllianceTC.org/our-work/equity-in-place](http://www.TheAllianceTC.org/our-work/equity-in-place)