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Hammond Meets Fair Housing Cudgel

HUD's Chicago Regional Office has been gunning for Hammond, IN officials since 2011 when they fired the head of the Hammond Housing Authority for trying to integrate the city's white neighborhoods in order to help provide minority families with better housing, schools, employment and transportation.

Challenging accusations made against former HHA Director Maria Becerra by Hammond's mayor that the Section 8 housing voucher under her supervision had exploded and grown out of control, Becerra complained to HUD that she was wrongfully fired.

Hammond officials and the HHA agreed in 2014 to pay Becerra \$200,000 to settle the accusations. The housing agency also agreed to reopen its Section 8 waiting list and publicly advertise the move.

The city and HHA agreed at the time to submit key officials to fair housing behavior modification training. The city also agreed to publicly support the Section 8 housing voucher rules and sponsor a public outreach program to encourage private landlords to participate in the Section 8 program.

The settlement, however, was not sufficient for HUD regional officials who were on the cusp of beginning to enforce rewritten rules of the Fair Housing Act.

Hammond, Rockford, IL, and Minneapolis-St. Paul are now the Midwest models for fair housing enforcement. Maurice McGough, HUD's region 5 fair housing chief, has made it clear he will accept no resistance to fair housing enforcement, pointedly telling Rockford officials last year that the department will hold federal subsidies hostage if the city fails to comply with HUD's orders. Rockford officials at the time accused HUD of extortion and blackmail.

McGough is now at the forefront of the Hammond dilemma. Not satisfied with the 2014 settlement, HUD tells Hammond officials to begin preparing an assessment of the city's racial and ethnic discrimination tactics to help craft a five-year anti-discrimination housing plan.

McGough emphasized that cities receiving federal subsidies have an obligation to promote racial and ethnic integration.

McGough tells Hammond officials the city is one of the nation's first communities to succumb to the new fair housing assessment requirements where cities receiving federal housing subsidies under several program categories and the Community Development Block Grant program must devise methods to racially integrate white neighborhoods.

Reluctance or failure to do so gives HUD the authority to take over the city's planning and zoning functions to ensure desegregation.

HUD ordered Hammond to conduct two public meetings to gather suggestions for integration. The second meeting will be held Sept. 1 at the Hammond Public Library.

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