



HUD Bureaucracy Carson's Big Hurdle

It finally came down to persuading famed neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson to take the helm at HUD. After all, HUD secretary is the traditional spot for minority appointments -- of the 15 secretaries, 10 have been minority selections, including the first secretary, Robert C. Weaver, who also was the first minority nominated for a Cabinet-level position.

The question now is whether Carson, a staunch political conservative, will be able to get a handle on a largely autonomous HUD bureaucracy of 8,500 employees. A veteran HUD official tells *HAL*, "He will be alright if he cleans his teeth with a file every morning."

Carson inherits a bureaucracy led primarily by newcomers that, under the Obama administration's systemic overhaul, is focusing on two goals -- universal rental housing and Fair Housing Act enforcement intended to diversify the nation's neighborhoods. Other HUD programs, including mainstay public housing, have suffered from neglect because of budget cuts and the emphasis on and diversion of resources to the operational transformation.

Carson walks into a hornet's nest of political intrigue and overall low morale. Sources tell *HAL* the only segment of the department's workforce with an upbeat outlook is in the number of employees hired in the past four years after former Secretary Shaun Donovan led a purge of veteran workers through buyouts and encouraged retirements.

Soon after Julian Castro succeeded Donovan in January 2015, HUD initiated a hiring spree to bring in more than 1,000 new workers in time to have them safely ensconced in the civil service system.

Carson's political ideology is no mystery. He is on the record saying helping the poor is not the job of government, while HUD's primary role has evolved into helping the poor overcome long-term poverty through housing stability. How Carson will resolve that conflict remains to be seen, but he will need a cadre of tough aides to overcome what is expected to be stiff resistance from embedded Obama administration loyalists.

Even more troubling for Carson will be his approach to disassembling the administration's signature HUD effort -- Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH), the regulatory rewrite of

the Fair Housing Act crafted to enforce a plethora of new rules designed to desegregate largely white suburban neighborhoods nationally by applying racial and ethnic quotas to each of the thousands of ZIP codes.

In a *Washington Times* column in 2015, Carson compared the AFFH effort to those intended to make schools more integrated, such as the mandatory busing enforced by the federal courts in the 1950s and 1960s. Describing the efforts as "failed social experiments," Carson wrote, "These government-engineered attempts to legislate racial equality creates consequences that often make matters worse."

With strong support from President-elect Donald Trump, who vowed during his campaign to rescind the AFFH rule, expect Carson to undo the policy as one of his first acts. The prospect of such abrupt changes, such as a possible rollback of the plans to build low-income housing in affluent neighborhoods, has government-subsidized housing advocates reeling.

"Dr. Ben Carson's nomination to serve as HUD secretary is surprising and concerning, given his lack of experience with or knowledge of the programs he would oversee," says Diane Yentel, the new president and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Another of Carson's likely initial targets is the state of the nation's remaining 900,000 public housing units, which HUD admits is at least \$26 billion behind in maintenance. Carson likely will focus on their rehabilitation and limit tenancy for able-bodied people to a set time period to force tenants into self-sufficiency.

But Carson's success or failure depends on how successful he is in reining in HUD's bureaucracy.

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