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Steering still subtle in some home markets

Agents often assume clients want neighbors of own race

By Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

Oakland County real estate agent Carol Frick has worked for years to push her colleagues to embrace the spirit, as well as the letter, of anti-discrimination laws.

And though she's seen immense progress, even she admits there's work to do. The issue of steering -- real estate agents showing black home buyers homes in black neighborhoods, and white neighborhoods to white buyers -- isn't dead, she said.

"Very few Realtors are intentionally discriminatory," said Frick, a past president of the Michigan Association of Realtors. More often, she said, agents simply assume their clients want neighbors of their own race.

It's a longtime problem that many agree is receding, but still rears up in ugly ways.

The city of Inkster and more than 100 home buyers filed separate lawsuits in 1998, after fair-housing testers and a WXYZ television crew filmed a Dearborn real estate agent telling white home buyers to avoid Inkster because of the city's black residents.

"We don't know how long this was going on, who he said it to, how



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Real estate agent Carol Frick has seen progress in ending steering -- where blacks are shown only homes in black areas and whites homes in white areas. It has been a common practice feeding segregation in the past.

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"We don't know how long this was going on, who he said it to, how many people decided not to come to Inkster because of this," said City Manager Robert L. Gordon, whose city is 68 percent black.

Despite such cases, even critics of the real estate industry say it has made strides.

"We are getting more evidence ... that we do have real estate agents doing the right thing," said Cliff Schrupp, executive director of the Fair Housing Center of Metro Detroit.

The National Association of Realtors started an anti-steering program in 1998. "One America" sponsors training sessions across the country to update Realtors on fair-housing law and equip them to better serve minority clients. The trade group also worked with fair-housing advocates and researchers to publish guidelines on the loaded words agents should avoid when dealing with buyers.

The evidence of progress comes from home buyers like Robert Coker. He and his wife were shown plenty of homes in white neighborhoods when they moved from Detroit several years ago, despite the fact that they're African-American. Their latest search has involved several mostly white communities, Coker said.

"The agent is working with us to find the right place to build," he said. "For us, race hasn't really played a role."

The last major nationwide study of real estate practices, published more than a decade ago, found minority clients were treated differently than whites roughly 50 percent of the time, said Margery Austin Turner, a researcher at the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank. That could range from blatant discrimination such as charging blacks higher rents, to more subtle steering.

Turner said real estate practices clearly aren't the only factor feeding segregation.

"But I think it's disingenuous to say this is simply a matter of choice," she said. "Steering still plays a role."

Several real estate agents declined to discuss for publication the role of race in the real estate market. Privately, some say clients ask them often about the racial makeup of a neighborhood -- something agents are barred by law from discussing.

Frick said reluctance to discuss the issue is understandable, given the fear of discrimination complaints. But she also said she supports continued -- and aggressive -- testing to keep agents alert to the issue.

"Once people become comfortable, they become complacent," she said. "If we let the issue die, then people forget."

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