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NEWS EDITORIALS HOUSING

Breaking segregation's grip

6/6/01

Racial segregation in housing is bad for our region. That alone should be reason enough for elected and private-sector officials to address a situation that can only do us harm.

A recent series of articles by News reporters Jay Rey, Deidre Williams and News Researcher Andrew Bailey pointed out some disturbing facts: Erie and Niagara counties rank as the nation's eighth most residentially segregated metropolitan area, the same ranking that existed 10 years ago. While some parts of the nation are forging ahead with residential integration, Rust Belt areas like Buffalo Niagara lag behind.

To be sure, changing hearts and minds can take years, if not generations. And while there are plenty of instances in which prospective renters or home buyers choose to live in familiar areas, there are still cases in which they are discouraged from branching out into the suburbs.

The unacceptable truth of the matter is that there are cases of illegal discrimination in housing. Disturbing figures from Housing Opportunities Made Equal show that there were 2,895 reported complaints of housing bias from 1991 to 2000. Of those, 77 percent proved to be of merit. The problem likely is far worse because not everybody reports such incidents, and word of mouth may well discourage minorities from even looking in predominantly white areas.

Among the more subtle and pernicious strategies used to keep minorities from seeking housing in the suburbs are false claims that the housing is no longer available, treating applicants differently because of the color of their skin or discouraging a prospective tenant by bad-mouthing the property.

Victims of discrimination are denied access to quality education, employment, retail, medical care and many other parts of life that are determined by where you happen to live, according to Scott Gehl, executive director of Housing Opportunities Made Equal. And we agree.

Combating segregation has to be a high priority on the political agenda. And enforcement must be swift. Landlords, real estate agents and other housing providers must get the message that discrimination is not acceptable. There have been encouraging signs; Amherst and Cheektowaga are beginning to integrate. But progress has been agonizingly slow.

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The message is clear: Segregation is bad for Buffalo Niagara. What businessman wants to locate in an area with the reputation as one of the most segregated in the country? This region needs to send a message to the rest of the nation that it is a welcoming community.



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