

Housing discrimination, segregation to be addressed in federally backed plan, officials say

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The average resident of Gentilly, an area where most residents are black, can expect to live to be 54 ½ -- a quarter-century less than in Lakeview, where residents are overwhelmingly white and can expect to live to be 80.

Such disparity in life expectancy is just one of the consequences in a city divided by race and class, one where resources are disproportionately invested in some communities while others are left to languish, housing advocates said at a public hearing Tuesday evening at the Sojourner Truth Neighborhood Center on Lafitte Street.

An effort to combat housing discrimination and reduce segregation, they said, could help change such disparities.

Dubbed the 2016 Assessment of Fair Housing, the effort is mandated under a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development rule released last year and is included in the larger plan to increase affordable housing in the city that Mayor Mitch Landrieu released last month.

The federal rule requires New Orleans and other cities that receive federal housing grants to reduce racial segregation in some neighborhoods and increase “access to opportunity” -- i.e., to jobs, transportation, quality schools and other needs -- in others.

Critics have decried the mandate as a giant residential affirmative action program that will strip municipalities of their right to spend housing grants as they see fit.

Proponents, however, say the rule merely forces cities to comply with the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which they say bans discrimination in theory but often doesn't work in practice.

To comply with the new rule, New Orleans must first identify which areas of the city lack opportunity and which areas are too segregated, then craft a federally approved plan to remedy those issues. The city is partnering with the Housing Authority of New Orleans and other groups to create the plan, with input from residents.

The first public hearing was Tuesday; a second will be held Aug. 27. A survey on people's housing experiences is also available at hano.org.

“We firmly want to see this process involve the people who experience housing injustice, because they're going to be the ones with the best handle to solve the problem,” said Mary Lee of Policy Link, a national research institute that has partnered with the city.

Concerns voiced Tuesday ran the gamut from substandard housing in certain areas to a lack of quality neighborhood schools and reliable transportation in others.

Neighborhood schools no longer “feel integrated with the neighborhood at all. They have kids that come from all over the place,” said Stephen Ostertag, a Gentilly resident.

Sabrina Carter decried the lack of access to public transportation for some residents, echoing critics who have opposed the Regional Transit Authority's emphasis on building streetcar lines that the critics say are targeted at tourists.

Emphasizing streetcars over buses hurts those “utilizing (bus) service for much more than to come and see how pretty New Orleans is,” Carter said.