

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman,
Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
December 1, 2022

Proposal to Create a Committee on Equitable Housing

This past June, the County Board of Supervisors adopted the resolution to repudiate discriminatory covenants in home-owner deeds, which is related to the work of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee on mapping racism and resistance in Milwaukee County. Thank you for taking this important action to raise awareness of past discrimination that persists to this day. The County Board's leadership has helped encourage other government bodies in the Milwaukee area to similarly adopt the resolution.

While important, repudiation is only a symbolic step toward the goal of eliminating current impediments to equitable housing. Residents of Milwaukee County face several critical housing issues:

- Corporate investors and wealthy landlords are buying properties at an alarming rate. One investor increased home purchases from 240 to 833 properties in just the past two years. According to the September 2022 report from the Community Development Alliance, 40% of all homes in Milwaukee valued at \$125,000 or less are owned by corporate investors. These investments lock out home ownership for people with modest incomes in predominantly Black neighborhoods and some Latino neighborhoods.
- Corporate investors and landlords are leaving homes blighted and therefore affect the value of the homes around them and the quality of life for those living in them.

- It has been incredibly difficult to identify, contact, and hold landlords accountable who hide behind LLC's. Transparency of the actions of these landlords is woefully lacking.
- In the coming year, property taxes are projected to increase between 10.3% and 31.86%, with highest rates increasing in the poorest neighborhoods, placing financial burdens on homeowners and causing rents to drastically increase. Seniors will be especially hard hit.
- Residents are confronted with a dramatic decrease of affordable housing, both for owners and renters, as property values increase and mortgage rates soar. This is particularly true for Black residents. In over 90% of the top urban neighborhoods in the United States, rents were unaffordable to local Black residents. Milwaukee neighborhoods are no different.
- Renters are being evicted at increasingly higher rates, many by local landlords who ignore ordinances or laws by refusing to accept subsidies under Section 8. This adds to the desperation of homelessness in the metropolitan area.
- Residents fear retaliation for reporting housing conditions in dire need of repair. Despite tenant rights, reporting has led to evictions or even accusations of child neglect in some cases. Municipalities of Milwaukee County need additional resources to better enforce tenant protections.
- People are persistently isolated in Milwaukee County by race and economic conditions, making the area one of the most segregated regions in the country.

These impediments and concerns face residents in all the communities of Milwaukee County, directly or indirectly. What price do we pay for our segregation and limiting access to safe, affordable, and equitable housing? How can we assure access to fair housing for all? These are the questions we must collectively answer. We believe the ability of residents to choose and afford where they live without fear or discrimination is essential to a thriving metropolitan area. All people and families require a secure and

stable address to obtain and keep jobs, enroll in schools, receive mail, and access the benefits of a healthy society.

We signers of this letter represent many of the local individuals and organizations working to meet these housing challenges and rectify impediments. Yet, too often, we have labored independently. That is why we are coming together now as members of the newly formed The Redress Roundtable to air concerns and strategize solutions for equitable housing.

We believe that the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors plays a similar role in partnering with the many municipalities of the County. The Board can be a forum where issues and solutions are presented, heard, strategized and acted upon so as to assure that safe, equitable and affordable housing is available to all residents. We recognize the Board acting in and of itself cannot be expected to contend with the depth and breadth of the many urgent housing issues and current impediments facing the County. We propose establishing a committee dedicated specifically to equitable housing.

A Committee on Equitable Housing of the County Board of Supervisors can become an essential place where voices advocating desegregation, stability, transparency, and affordability in housing are raised, heard and advanced. Such a committee would be more accessible to residents and organizations of Milwaukee County than the full Board, allowing a greater number of voices, concerns and ideas to be presented. It can be a vital forum where potential solutions are aired, prioritized, and further developed into potential policies, programs and services, then presented to the full Board for adoption and enactment. Additionally, the work of the committee can become a valuable source of information for educating renters, landlords, home owners and the general public on equitable housing issues.

Membership in the committee would include County Board Supervisors, area leaders with knowledge of housing initiatives, diverse residents with lived experiences, and members of the Redress Roundtable. The committee will coordinate with other existing committees of the Board to assure housing concerns are not duplicated.

Of course, a Committee on Equitable Housing, faced with the depth and breadth of housing problems, cannot be merely added to the responsibilities of existing staff but must be budgeted and resourced accordingly. We recommend creating a dedicated position, which reports to the Office of the County Clerk, to do the work of the committee. Such work would include developing agendas, recording proceedings, helping to sift and prioritize issues raised, preparing proposed programmatic and legal documents, etc.

We propose the Committee on Equitable Housing could potentially address these issues:

- Developing strategies and enacting restrictions on the takeover of properties by corporate investors.
- Identifying landlords who chronically violate law and are unduly evicting renters, map who they are, and present strategies and legal actions to the board to restrict illegal evictions.
- Educating and preparing homeowners and renters about tax-assessment increases and the resources available to mitigate and challenge rising costs, as a part of the ongoing need to raise people's financial literacy.
- Introduce annual public forums for residents to share their grievances about negligent landlords
- Ensure that landlords and new developments are compliant with accessibility and non-discrimination laws so that people with disabilities have access to housing.

These actions are our recommendations for an initial agenda. The committee would have the capacity and capability to hear the many voices of the community, to set future agenda and to strategize and propose solutions to the full Board that work toward justice in fair housing in our communities.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this proposal for a Committee on Equitable Housing for the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors. We look forward to your comments and will contact you to discuss how to advance this proposal.

Respectfully,

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