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Women's Intergroup Conference

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GUIDE FOR FAIR HOUSING AMATEUR "LOBBYISTS"

There is no quicker way to alienate an opponent than by arguing vociferously or by accusing him. This immediately antagonizes him and puts him on the defensive. Remember that he opposes this legislation because he has certain fears and doubts. Find out what they are. Let him talk about them. Only then can you know what your best line of reasoning can be. Try to give him a reason for changing his mind. Don't be timid -- the legislator is your elected representative. You have a right to know where he stands. He needs to know where you stand.

Concentrate on the legislators who have voted "no", and on those who are newly elected. If you don't know the legislator you are trying to find, ask one of the pages, or any of the legislators. In addition, there are charts on each desk indicating plan. There is also one near the Speaker's Rostrum.

Many legislators are uninformed or misinformed about the Fair Housing issue. They need to know:

That property values do not drop when a Negro family moves in, unless whites panic and sell at the urging of "block-busting" realtors who frighten them into selling at a loss, and then the buyers re-sell at a profit.

That in respect to a referendum, no one can foretell how the people would vote. A lot would depend upon the campaigns waged by both sides, and what appeals were made to emotions and to prejudice. Regardless of how such a vote might go, segregation is morally wrong. There are some matters which are not decided by majority vote. The Supreme Court has a history of protecting the rights of people regardless of the majority action of city councils or state legislatures. Furthermore, the legislature has a duty to legislate, and not to abdicate its responsibility to the public which elected it.

That discrimination costs money -- since it reduces buying power, increases welfare costs and special services (such as health, law and order) and increases family problems.

Fair Housing legislation would not force a landlord to rent to "just anyone". The house owner would still retain the right to investigate the applicant's credit and character references. Such legislation would simply insure consideration of the applicant as an individual without regard to color, religion or national origin.

That the purpose of Civil Rights legislation is to control behavior rather than to legislate morality. There are laws to control behavior in respect to burglary, murder, etc. It is also important to remember that legislation by itself is a great educational force, and tends to improve the moral climate of the community. Witness the effect of the
RHODE ISLAND LAWS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT, AND HOW THEY HAVE HELPED TO CHANGE THE ATTITUDE OF EMPLOYERS AND OF WORKERS.

That the ownership of property does not give, and never has given, the owner the absolute, unrestricted right to do with his property as he wishes, irrespective of the larger public good. This is true philosophically and legally. We are all acquainted with the restrictions on the use of property through zoning, minimum housing standards, building codes, safety regulations, etc.

That the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination will have the responsibility for the implementation and enforcement of a fair housing law. Their principal function is that of education and conciliation. In the case of a complaint, they consult with both the complainant and the landlord or his agent. If they find that there is no apparent discrimination on account of race, etc., the matter is dropped, and without any publicity. If the Commission believes there is evidence of discrimination, a private hearing is held by the Commission Against Discrimination. If this hearing does find discrimination, it will issue a cease and desist order. Only if this cease and desist order of the Commission is ignored by the owner or his agent, does the Commission go to the Superior Court. Then the Superior Court hears the case all over again, and issues its own findings. If it too finds that there has been discrimination on account of race, etc., it will issue its cease and desist order. If the owner persists in ignoring this cease and desist order of the Superior Court, then the judge may take the usual action for contempt of court.

You may anticipate the following questions which we have already been asked:

Q. "Why appeal to me? This is a job for the clergy."

A. The Clergy are doing their job in respect to discrimination. They are preaching, they are marching, they are setting an example to their congregants. The Clergy are also trying to do a job in respect to honesty and other virtues, but the state has the responsibility to legislate to prevent injustice in all areas of social activity, whether it be robbery or murder or discrimination. The Legislature may not ignore injustice and refuse to legislate to prevent injustice by saying that it is somebody else's responsibility to educate the people. No educational campaign, no matter how thorough or how well supported by the state and by the Clergy, can expect to be effective with 100% of the residents of any community. The family, the church, other agencies of society, work toward socially desirable goals, but ultimately it is the responsibility of government to establish the moral climate and to provide specific prohibitions against injustice.

Q. "Why me? There is no problem in my district. We have no Negro families" -- or, "We have only one family."

A. You do indeed have a problem. Negroes may fear to seek housing in your area, feeling they would encounter hostility. You, as a State legislator,
MUST NOT ONLY REPRESENT YOUR DISTRICT, BUT MUST ALSO CONSIDER THE WELFARE OF THE PEOPLE OF THE WHOLE STATE, SINCE THIS LEGISLATURE IS A STATE BODY. ELSE THERE WOULD BE NO NEED FOR YOU TO COME HERE. ALL LEGISLATION COULD THEN BE CONDUCTED WITHIN DISTRICTS -- EACH HAVING ITS OWN SMALL LEGISLATURE!

Q. "WHY DO I GET MORE CALLS FROM THOSE WHO OPPOSE FAIR HOUSING? I DON'T HEAR FROM ANYONE WHO'S IN FAVOR."

A. OUR EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN THAT USUALLY A LEGISLATOR RECEIVES MORE CALLS FROM THOSE IN FAVOR THAN THOSE WHO ARE OPPOSED. THERE MAY, HOWEVER, BE SOME CASES WHERE A LEGISLATOR DOES NOT HEAR FROM MANY WHO WANT FAIR HOUSING LEGISLATION. THIS MAY BE BECAUSE SUCH PROponents HAVE EXPERIENCED FRUSTRATION ABOUT FAIR HOUSING, AND FEEL THAT IT IS USELESS TO MAKE REPRESENTATIONS TO CERTAIN MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE. IN ANY EVENT, NO LEGISLATOR HAS, TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, RECEIVED COMMENT FROM AS MANY AS 1% OF HIS ELECTORATE. THEREFORE, WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS NOT THE RELATIVE NUMBERS OR PROponents AND OPPONENTS BUT THE STRENGTH OF THEIR ARGUMENTS.

Q. DO YOU EXPECT ME TO SUPPORT A LAW THAT ISN'T ALL-INCLUSIVE? IF YOU CLAIM THIS IS WRONG FROM A MORAL STANDPOINT, WHY ARE YOU ADVOCATING A LAW THAT LEAVES ROOM FOR EXEMPTIONS?"

A. IF YOU ARE SINCERE IN WHAT YOU'RE SAYING, AND I'M SURE YOU ARE, PLEASE MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD IN THIS LEGISLATURE. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT AN ALL-INCLUSIVE BILL HAS NO CHANCE OF PASSING -- THEREFORE WE HAVE BEEN FORCED TO SUPPORT BILLS WHICH WOULD GIVE THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE "HALF A LOAF", SO TO SPEAK.

Q. "WHY DON'T YOU APPEAL TO THE SENATE? WHY DO THEY DROP A 'HOT POTATO' IN OUR LAPs WITH A BILL THAT PROVIDES NO EXEMPTIONS AND LEAVES US TO GRAPPLE WITH IT? WHY DON'T YOU GET THEM TO SPONSOR A BILL JOINTLY WITH US?"


Q. "HOW MANY STATES NOW HAVE FAIR HOUSING LAWS?"

A. MANY STATES HAVE FAIR HOUSING LAWS. OF THESE, THIRTEEN STATES HAVE LAWS WHICH COVER PRIVATELY OWNED HOUSING.

Q. "WHICH BILL ARE YOU SUPPORTING?"

SPONSORED BY THE EQUAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES GROUP WILL NOT PASS BUT THAT THE BILL THAT HAS A CHANCE OF PASSAGE IS A BILL SIMILAR TO THE TWO JUST MENTIONED. TWO BILLS INTRODUCED BY MR. MARTIN PROVIDE FOR AN ADVANCE OPINION OF THE SUPREME COURT AND FOR A PUBLIC REFERENDUM. THESE ARE TACTICS OF DELAY AND ANNOYANCE AND SHOULD NOT BE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY THE LEGISLATURE.

Q. "Why can't they (Negroes) earn their way to decent housing, as my grandfather from (Ireland) (or Italy, etc.) did? He had to fight the same thing."

A. His face was white. There is simply no comparison in the degree of discrimination to which you refer.

Q. "Isn't this a matter of economics, and not one of discrimination?"

A. Discrimination in employment keeps the Negro's economic status below that of the whites. Some strides have been made here because of existing laws against discrimination in employment. Yet, regardless of their economic capacity, even well-to-do Negro families find most doors closed to them in most neighborhoods of the state.

Q. "What's wrong with people wanting to live among their own kind?"

A. Nothing, if they do so of their own free will. No one, however, should be forced to do so. Many of us prefer the opportunity of raising our children in integrated areas where decent housing is available, so they may learn to know and appreciate people of all races and religions.

Q. "If one Negro family moves in, won't there be a flood of other Negro families?"

A. Not unless all the whites panic and move. After all, only 2% of the state's population are Negroes.

Q. "How do I know a Negro family would maintain its property as well as whites do?"

A. Do you have any such guarantee when a white family moves in? We've all seen property that has been neglected by white people. The evidence is clear that Negroes who are able to buy property have the same interest in the property and neighborhood that their white neighbors have. It is unfair to blame all Negroes who are forced to live in slum areas for the poor condition of these overcrowded areas. Most often the Negro is not the cause, but the victim of such neglect.

Q. "What are the penalties for the violators of a Fair Housing Law?"

A. As explained earlier, the Commission has the responsibility of investigation and of holding a private hearing. The Commission may issue its
OWN CEASE AND DESIST ORDER IF IT FINDS DISCRIMINATION ON ACCOUNT OF RACE, ETC. IF THIS CEASE AND DESIST ORDER IS IGNORED, THE COMMISSION MAY REFER THE MATTER TO THE SUPERIOR COURT. THE SUPERIOR COURT HOLDS ITS OWN HEARING, HEARS EVIDENCE, AND MAKES ITS OWN DECISION. IF IT FINDS THAT THERE IS DISCRIMINATION ON ACCOUNT OF RACE, ETC., IT WILL ISSUE ITS OWN CEASE AND DESIST ORDER. IT IS ONLY IF THE VIOLATOR CONTINUES TO IGNORE THIS CEASE AND DESIST ORDER OF THE SUPERIOR COURT, THAT THE JUDGE MAY IMPOSE A PENALTY. THIS PENALTY COULD BE EITHER A FINE OR IMPRISONMENT, FOR A CIVIL VIOLATION. IT IS A TRIBUTE TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COMMISSION AND THE DECENCY OF THE PEOPLE OF RHODE ISLAND THAT, IN ITS 16 YEARS OF EXISTENCE, ENFORCING RHODE ISLAND LAWS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT AND PUBLIC ACCOMMODATIONS, THE COMMISSION HAS NEVER BEEN REQUIRED TO GO TO THE SUPERIOR COURT, AND THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A PENALTY IMPOSED BY THE SUPERIOR COURT.

Q. ARE YOU A REGISTERED LOBBYIST? DON'T YOU KNOW YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO BE LOBBYING WITHOUT REGISTERING WITH THE SECRETARY OF STATE?

A. I'M NOT A PAID REPRESENTATIVE OF ANY GROUP. I'M AN INTERESTED CITIZEN CONCERNED WITH THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE WE ELECT TO REPRESENT US. THE HOUSE CHAMBER IS OPEN TO ALL THE STATE'S CITIZENS AND SINCE THE SESSION HAS NOT BEEN CALLED TO ORDER YET, I'M USING THESE FEW MINUTES TO SPEAK TO OUR DULY ELECTED LEGISLATORS.

A FINAL WORD: EVEN WHEN YOU FIND STRONG OPPOSITION, DON'T "CLOSE DOORS" BY ANGRY RETORTS. LEAVE THE "DOOR OPEN" SO TO SPEAK, FOR FURTHER CONVERSATION. THE NEXT TIME IT MAY BE ON A FRIENDLIER LEVEL, AND YOU WILL FIND THE SAME PERSON MORE WILLING TO TALK AGAIN WITH YOU. GO TO IT, AND GOOD LUCK!

Prepared by
Women's Intergroup Conference