

National Fair Housing Alliance Uncovers High Rate of Housing Discrimination Against African-American Hurricane Evacuees

For Immediate Release

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WASHINGTON, DC, December 20, 2005 – The National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA) released today a report documenting a significant incidence of housing discrimination against African-American persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina. NFHA also announced the filing of five race-based housing discrimination complaints against rental housing complexes located in Dallas, Texas; Birmingham, Alabama; and Gainesville, Florida. These complaints, filed with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), are based on evidence uncovered by testing conducted in seventeen cities. These are the first in a series of complaints to be filed against apartment complexes throughout the South and Southwest because rental managers denied housing or gave untruthful information to African-Americans who identified themselves as people displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

In response to concerns of housing discrimination against persons forced to evacuate because of Hurricane Katrina, NFHA conducted an investigation of rental housing practices in five states to determine whether victims of Hurricane Katrina would be treated unfairly based on their race. NFHA conducted tests over the telephone to determine what both African-American and White home seekers were told about unit availability, rent, discounts, and other terms and conditions of apartment leasing. In 66 percent of these tests – 43 of 65 instances – White callers were favored over African-American callers.

NFHA's goal in filing these complaints is to ensure that victims of Hurricane Katrina are given equal access to housing regardless of race, national origin, familial status and disability and to thwart attempts by managers to perpetuate residential segregation.

Within the rental housing market, discrimination occurs in a variety of ways, including: the denial of available rental units; higher rents or security deposits for minorities or individuals in other protected classes; specials inducements and incentives for White renters; and refusal to make a reasonable accommodation for a disabled individual. Discrimination in the rental market may also be evidenced by the failure of an agent to make or keep an appointment. NFHA documented evidence of various types of discrimination in its post-Katrina investigation. In some instances, the discrimination was a clear denial of apartment availability to African-Americans. Whites were told that one or more apartments were available while the African-Americans were told that nothing

was available. At other complexes, rental agents never returned phone calls from African-Americans but did return messages left by White callers. In one case, two White testers were given a range of rental prices and availability when they called. In contrast, the African-American tester was told that the computer was down and the agent would have to call her back with rental price information. The agent never called the tester back.

“Katrina’s destruction was both horrific and painful. It illuminates the hazards of both racial and economic segregation in our communities and the crucial responsibility and legal obligation that the housing industry has in ensuring equal treatment and promoting integrated neighborhoods. Not only do integrated neighborhoods create a more diverse community and reduce the concentration of poverty in a city, they also sustain better schools, more amenities, a healthy infrastructure, a stronger tax base and a broader mix of businesses. Neighborhood integration provides everyone with the opportunity to have multi-cultural and multi-racial associations,” said Shanna L. Smith, President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Fair Housing Alliance.

In areas affected by Katrina and throughout the country, it is critical for federal, state and local agencies to guarantee that the federal Fair Housing Act is upheld for all residents in the process of securing safe and decent housing. “FEMA has an obligation to follow the Fair Housing Act and provide housing assistance that does not perpetuate racial segregation,” said Ms. Smith. Additional funding must be made available to promote compliance with fair housing laws and educate consumers about their right to secure housing, homeowners insurance and mortgage loans free from discrimination. It is also incumbent upon the housing and real estate industries to support and advance integration in our neighborhoods so that all citizens can gain equal access to wealth, stability and our country’s social safety net.

NFHA will continue to test apartment buildings and complexes throughout the South and Southwest to measure compliance with the federal Fair Housing Act for people with disabilities, families with children, Latinos and Asian-Americans.

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About the National Fair Housing Alliance (www.nationalfairhousing.org)

Founded in 1988, the National Fair Housing Alliance is a consortium of more than 220 private, non-profit fair housing organizations, state and local civil rights agencies, and individuals from throughout the United States. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., NFHA, through comprehensive education, advocacy and enforcement programs, provides equal access to apartments, houses, mortgage loans and insurance policies for all residents of the nation.