

COLLABORATION AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

IDAHO FAIR HOUSING FORUM SEEKS COMMON CAUSE THROUGH COMMUNICATION AND CREATIVITY

By Erik Kingston, PCED

I will never forget my introduction to the disconnect between fair housing advocates and housing providers. I had been asked to review an application for HUD's Fair Housing Initiatives Program (FHIP). The abstract's stated goal was to "increase the number of complaints filed in Idaho." I reread it just to be sure, and then emailed the author, someone I had been working pretty closely with for awhile. I naïvely suggested a more positive goal might be to increase compliance or reduce violations, and received a one-line response: "I'm sorry you don't support fair housing."

What we had here, I suspected, was a failure to communicate. I had spent years serving as a volunteer and board member for programs involving individuals with disabilities, and as an ESL teacher working with immigrants and refugees. I have family members with disabilities and am the adoptive father of a daughter from China. I supported fair housing, but it was clear I needed to learn how others perceived it.

More than a decade later, I am still learning, and happy to report that this particular individual is a great friend and fellow partner in the Idaho Fair Housing Forum.

Creating a Forum

The Fair Housing Forum was created at the suggestion of Brian Dale, Operations Specialist for the HUD Idaho Field Office. Brian recognized that the strain among Idaho's stakeholders reflected what had prompted him to form a similar coalition in Utah. That experience involved bringing together people with different perspectives on fair housing.

It was a chance to help participants understand the law, and one another, better. The same goal is definitely being realized here in the Gem State.

Tension is all too common among fair housing advocates and those required to comply with federal laws. Some hold the notion that all landlords are bad on the one hand, or that all advocates are out to get housing providers on the other. Clearly that is not the case, but longstanding mistrust tends to keep the two sides from engaging in a productive dialogue. Previous attempts at collaboration were short-lived, but Brian is both persuasive and persistent. Our current group has been meeting and cooperating regularly since 2003.

The core group includes property developers and managers; local and state government; fair-housing, human-rights

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Refugees from Burundi, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo discuss housing and language challenges with Forum members.

Photo provided by IHFA.

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and disability advocates, Legal Aid Services, public housing authorities, realtors, and the statewide not-for-profit Idaho Housing and Finance Association (IHFA). Our members also belong to state and regional trade groups and coalitions like the Idaho chapter of the Affordable Housing Management Association (AHMA), Idaho Rural Partnership, Idaho Community Review Team, and IHFA's Regional Housing Roundtable. This network extends our reach to thousands of people and institutions throughout a sparsely populated rural state.

Forum members meet regularly in person and by phone to discuss trends, violations, case law, and enforcement. Ideally, we aim to anticipate needs and recognize opportunities, so it pays to have people with diverse interests and perspectives at the table. Despite occasional pointed discussion, we work hard to create a respectful, safe place for members to explore real and perceived barriers to fair housing. Like any group, as various members have gotten to know one another, we have developed a sense of trust that helps cultivate a shared group identity.

When people find common ground and mutual interests, this is what can happen. Former adversaries begin to think in terms of *we* instead of *them and us*. Gradually, Forum members have come to appreciate our diverse skill sets and values, and we have been able to harness our collective energy to make things happen. This article outlines a few examples of projects that have grown out of this collaboration.

Opportunities Taken

For the first few years, Forum members sponsored annual training events and Fair Housing Month proclamations each April. While this was great, we sensed that a one-time event or action had little impact beyond the photo-op or workshop. Forum training and conferences were attracting hundreds of participants in each region, but we sought to create a more lasting impression.

Planting Seeds

Our answer was a statewide creative competition for high-school students using the theme of fair housing and diversity. The aim was to cultivate an ongoing, statewide conversation in classrooms, at kitchen tables, and other settings. We pooled our resources and secured sponsors to offer really good prizes, such as a new MacBook, digital cameras, and iPods for



More information about the Fair Housing Forum can be found at www.fairhousingforum.org.

the top winners. An independent panel of judges selected the top 12 entries, which were then featured in 20,000 calendars printed and distributed in fall of 2006 (because fair housing is important every day of the year).

Winners submitted a statement about what he or she learned or felt during the process, and we included world holidays from several traditions along with quotes and information on civil rights and fair housing. The following year, the Forum partnered with the Idaho Human Rights Education Center, which had long held its own student art competition, but lacked the resources to produce a calendar. When we announced our second project, we had so many sponsorship offers we expanded the current calendar to 18 months. These now hang on the walls of schools, retail businesses, government offices, and banks with their daily message of diversity and inclusion.

Expanding Services to LEP Individuals

About the same time, Forum members decided to address HUD's increased emphasis of long-standing laws involving Limited English Proficiency, or LEP. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (National Origin Discrimination Against Persons With LEP) states that "Organizations that receive federal funds must create, implement and follow a Language Assistance Plan (LAP) that effectively accommodates the needs of all customers."

Rural communities and other recipients of federal funds often lack administrative capacity, which makes it challenging to deal with complex federal laws and regulations. Many Idaho communities are led by part-time mayors, and professional staff are typically spread pretty thin. We saw

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a need for clear and simple guidance to better serve LEP customers. Our initial thought was to create a CD with LEP guidelines, a checklist, and assorted resources. As we realized the information would need to be updated periodically, we settled on a more dynamic website.

This concept evolved into a more robust, Idaho-specific website devoted to fair housing and related law, with interest sections for housing providers and consumers, an FAQ and Glossary section, and a News and Events area featuring updates on training opportunities, case law and other current activities. Launched in mid-2007, www.fairhousingforum.org eventually attracted the attention of Mayor Bloomberg's office in New York City. Staff requested permission to borrow elements of our LEP resources. We refer users to the website on a regular basis, and use it to post training and outreach materials as well as links to educational resources.

IHFA's regional Housing Roundtable meetings presented an LEP training opportunity for housing stakeholders in each of Idaho's major regions. Our main message was simple: good customer service is really at the heart of LEP accommodation and fair housing. We even coined a slogan for use in our outreach materials: Customer service is **welcome** in any language.

It is a safe bet that these LEP materials will be updated and expanded. Boise, Idaho, is one of a handful of resettlement communities for refugees escaping violence and persecution in their home countries. With over 5,000 refugees sent to date—and another 800 expected by fall of 2009—Boise is coming to terms with our new American neighbors. While many of these refugees remain in Boise, others have relocated to surrounding communities in Oregon and Idaho where employment opportunities exist in the agricultural industry. Resettlement organizations and volunteer networks are helping us address the challenges and embrace

the unique gifts presented by the most recent spices thrown into our melting pot of culture.

The Forum now includes local refugee resettlement agencies, and we have invited refugees from Burundi, Congo, Somalia, and elsewhere to share their stories, struggles, and creativity as we seek lasting solutions. Fittingly, these meetings have required someone who can translate among English, Kirundi, Mai-Mai, and Arabic.

Conclusion

It is one thing to discuss policy and resources issues with other agencies, it is quite another to sit with people who have been uprooted from their homes. Many are now struggling to find and keep jobs and housing. All express a sense of helplessness at the many parts of their lives they cannot control. One gentleman, a medical doctor, speaks fluent French and several African languages. He and other professionals will take any job that pays, from a car wash to custodial work or fruit-picking. Another stressed through an interpreter, "We trust what we earn from our sweat, not charity."

Language is identity. Our native language defines us, our culture, and our history. It subtitles our dreams and gives voice to our personal narratives. Integrating into a new culture and country means acquiring new language skills, but embracing that new language can sometimes feel like a rejection of our identities and origins. This applies to any language, including that of fair housing advocates and housing professionals. In order to grow and prosper, we may need to surrender a small part of our ego to embrace a new common language. Sometimes we need to look for a bigger table, too. 🍷

~Erik Kingston has a background in applied linguistics and languages. He connects people—and dots—in the areas of affordable housing, economic and community development for IHFA in Boise, ID and studies Mandarin with his daughter.