



We Educate, Advocate and Respond.

## **Testimony Submitted to the National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity**

### **Public Hearing on “Still Separate and Unequal: The State of Fair Housing in America” Boston, Massachusetts – September 22, 2008**

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the *Winchester Multicultural Network*. Based in Winchester, Massachusetts, the mission of the Multicultural Network is to promote the recognition, understanding, and appreciation of diversity; advocate for each and every person’s civil rights; and confront intolerance. To accomplish this mission, the Multicultural Network works in a variety of ways with housing organizations, the schools, the police department, and other town organizations. One of the activities undertaken during the spring of 2008 was to work with the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston to host a four-part discussion series titled *Race and Place* using the documentary *Race, the Power of an Illusion*. Approximately 40 people viewed this series of PBS-produced videos and participated in extensive follow-up discussion. This participation included local officials, representative of local banks and businesses, realtors, and private citizens. Participants described the series as “eye opening” and a series of follow-up activities currently are underway.

Winchester is a mostly white, higher income residential suburb located approximately eight miles north of Boston. The affordability of housing is a major problem, especially for first time home buyers and people that are part of the middle-income workforce. Using standard housing guidelines, an income corresponding to approximately 150 percent of the Boston area median income is required to purchase a lower priced, entry-level single-family house. Thus, it is difficult for a large proportion of the population to enter into Winchester’s housing market, leading to important changes to the town’s character.

While Winchester has made great strides over the past thirty years in accepting people of different races and ethnicities, evidence from recent local hearings and events indicates that we still have a ways to go. This includes, but is not limited to housing. For example, there is a strong support for giving as high a local preference as is legally permissible in the management of public and other affordable housing programs. Doing so has the effect of discriminating against people who are not already living in Winchester.

In constructing new housing, there is broad support for building only one and two-bedroom housing units so as to limit the ability of households with children to move into Winchester and add children to a school system that already is over capacity. Winchester’s excellent school system historically has been an important reason for people choosing to move to the town. Like many other suburban towns, we are now saying we no longer want these families because of the increased financial burden they will place on the town’s budget.

Responding to these issues certainly requires strong local leadership, and the Multicultural Network is working with both local public officials and private business representatives to achieve this objective. Our job, however, is made easier by also having strong state and national leadership so we can work in concert one another in achieving housing programs that eliminate separateness and inequality and become truly fair.

John H. Suhrbier, Board of Directors