

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND THE DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

GROUP HOMES, LOCAL LAND USE, AND THE FAIR HOUSING ACT

Since the federal Fair Housing Act ("the Act") was amended by Congress in 1988 to add protections for persons with disabilities and families with children, there has been a great deal of litigation concerning the Act's effect on the ability of local governments to exercise control over group living arrangements, particularly for persons with disabilities. The Department of Justice has taken an active part in much of this litigation, often following referral of a matter by the Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD"). This joint statement provides an overview of the Fair Housing Act's requirements in this area. Specific topics are addressed in more depth in the attached Questions and Answers.

The Fair Housing Act prohibits a broad range of practices that discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, familial status, and disability.⁽¹⁾ The Act does not pre-empt local zoning laws. However, the Act applies to municipalities and other local government entities and prohibits them from making zoning or land use decisions or implementing land use policies that exclude or otherwise discriminate against protected persons, including individuals with disabilities.

The Fair Housing Act makes it unlawful --

- To utilize land use policies or actions that treat groups of persons with disabilities less favorably than groups of non-disabled persons. An example would be an ordinance prohibiting housing for persons with disabilities or a specific type of disability, such as mental illness, from locating in a particular area, while allowing other groups of unrelated individuals to live together in that area.
- To take action against, or deny a permit, for a home because of the disability of individuals who live or would live there. An example would be denying a building permit for a home because it was intended to provide housing for persons with mental retardation.
- To refuse to make reasonable accommodations in land use and zoning policies and procedures where such accommodations may be necessary to afford persons or groups of persons with disabilities an equal opportunity to use and enjoy housing.
- What constitutes a reasonable accommodation is a case-by-case determination.
- Not all requested modifications of rules or policies are reasonable. If a requested modification imposes an undue financial or administrative burden on a local government, or if a modification creates a fundamental alteration in a local government's land use and zoning scheme, it is not a "reasonable" accommodation.

The disability discrimination provisions of the Fair Housing Act do not extend to persons who claim to be disabled solely on the basis of having been adjudicated a juvenile delinquent, having a criminal record, or being a sex offender. Furthermore, the Fair Housing Act does not protect persons who currently use illegal drugs, persons who have been convicted of the manufacture or

sale of illegal drugs, or persons with or without disabilities who present a direct threat to the persons or property of others.

HUD and the Department of Justice encourage parties to group home disputes to explore all reasonable dispute resolution procedures, like mediation, as alternatives to litigation.

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Questions and Answers on the Fair Housing Act and Zoning

Q. Does the Fair Housing Act pre-empt local zoning laws?

No. "Pre-emption" is a legal term meaning that one level of government has taken over a field and left no room for government at any other level to pass laws or exercise authority in that area. The Fair Housing Act is not a land use or zoning statute; it does not pre-empt local land use and zoning laws. This is an area where state law typically gives local governments primary power. However, if that power is exercised in a specific instance in a way that is inconsistent with a federal law such as the Fair Housing Act, the federal law will control. Long before the 1988 amendments, the courts had held that the Fair Housing Act prohibited local governments from exercising their land use and zoning powers in a discriminatory way.

Q. What is a group home within the meaning of the Fair Housing Act?

The term "group home" does not have a specific legal meaning. In this statement, the term "group home" refers to housing occupied by groups of unrelated individuals with disabilities. Sometimes, but not always, housing is provided by organizations that also offer various services for individuals with disabilities living in the group homes. Sometimes it is this group home operator, rather than the individuals who live in the home, that interacts with local government in seeking permits and making requests for reasonable accommodations on behalf of those individuals.

The term "group home" is also sometimes applied to any group of unrelated persons who live together in a dwelling -- such as a group of students who voluntarily agree to share the rent on a house. The Act does not generally affect the ability of local governments to regulate housing of this kind, as long as they do not discriminate against the residents on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, handicap (disability) or familial status (families with minor children).

Q. Who are persons with disabilities within the meaning of the Fair Housing Act?

The Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of handicap. "Handicap" has the same legal meaning as the term "disability" which is used in other federal civil rights laws. Persons with disabilities (handicaps) are individuals with mental or physical impairments which substantially limit one or more major life activities. The term mental or physical impairment may include conditions such as blindness, hearing impairment, mobility impairment, HIV infection, mental retardation, alcoholism, drug addiction, chronic fatigue, learning disability, head injury,

and mental illness. The term major life activity may include seeing, hearing, walking, breathing, performing manual tasks, caring for one's self, learning, speaking, or working. The Fair Housing Act also protects persons who have a record of such an impairment, or are regarded as having such an impairment.

Current users of illegal controlled substances, persons convicted for illegal manufacture or distribution of a controlled substance, sex offenders, and juvenile offenders, are not considered disabled under the Fair Housing Act, by virtue of that status.

The Fair Housing Act affords no protections to individuals with or without disabilities who present a direct threat to the persons or property of others. Determining whether someone poses such a direct threat must be made on an individualized basis, however, and cannot be based on general assumptions or speculation about the nature of a disability.

Q. What kinds of local zoning and land use laws relating to group homes violate the Fair Housing Act?

Local zoning and land use laws that treat groups of unrelated persons with disabilities less favorably than similar groups of unrelated persons without disabilities violate the Fair Housing Act. For example, suppose a city's zoning ordinance defines a "family" to include up to six unrelated persons living together as a household unit, and gives such a group of unrelated persons the right to live in any zoning district without special permission. If that ordinance also disallows a group home for six or fewer people with disabilities in a certain district or requires this home to seek a use permit, such requirements would conflict with the Fair Housing Act. The ordinance treats persons with disabilities worse than persons without disabilities.

A local government may generally restrict the ability of groups of unrelated persons to live together as long as the restrictions are imposed on all such groups. Thus, in the case where a family is defined to include up to six unrelated people, an ordinance would not, on its face, violate the Act if a group home for seven people with disabilities was not allowed to locate in a single family zoned neighborhood, because a group of seven unrelated people without disabilities would also be disallowed. However, as discussed below, because persons with disabilities are also entitled to request reasonable accommodations in rules and policies, the group home for seven persons with disabilities would have to be given the opportunity to seek an exception or waiver. If the criteria for reasonable accommodation are met, the permit would have to be given in that instance, but the ordinance would not be invalid in all circumstances.

Q. What is a reasonable accommodation under the Fair Housing Act?

As a general rule, the Fair Housing Act makes it unlawful to refuse to make "reasonable accommodations" (modifications or exceptions) to rules, policies, practices, or services, when such accommodations may be necessary to afford persons with disabilities an equal opportunity to use or enjoy a dwelling.

Even though a zoning ordinance imposes on group homes the same restrictions it imposes on other groups of unrelated people, a local government may be required, in individual cases and when requested to do so, to grant a reasonable accommodation to a group home for persons with disabilities. For example, it may be a reasonable accommodation to waive a setback requirement

so that a paved path of travel can be provided to residents who have mobility impairments. A similar waiver might not be required for a different type of group home where residents do not have difficulty negotiating steps and do not need a setback in order to have an equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling.

Not all requested modifications of rules or policies are reasonable. Whether a particular accommodation is reasonable depends on the facts, and must be decided on a case-by-case basis. The determination of what is reasonable depends on the answers to two questions: First, does the request impose an undue burden or expense on the local government? Second, does the proposed use create a fundamental alteration in the zoning scheme? If the answer to either question is "yes," the requested accommodation is unreasonable.

What is "reasonable" in one circumstance may not be "reasonable" in another. For example, suppose a local government does not allow groups of four or more unrelated people to live together in a single-family neighborhood. A group home for four adults with mental retardation would very likely be able to show that it will have no more impact on parking, traffic, noise, utility use, and other typical concerns of zoning than an "ordinary family." In this circumstance, there would be no undue burden or expense for the local government nor would the single-family character of the neighborhood be fundamentally altered. Granting an exception or waiver to the group home in this circumstance does not invalidate the ordinance. The local government would still be able to keep groups of unrelated persons without disabilities from living in single-family neighborhoods.

By contrast, a fifty-bed nursing home would not ordinarily be considered an appropriate use in a single-family neighborhood, for obvious reasons having nothing to do with the disabilities of its residents. Such a facility might or might not impose significant burdens and expense on the community, but it would likely create a fundamental change in the single-family character of the neighborhood. On the other hand, a nursing home might not create a "fundamental change" in a neighborhood zoned for multi-family housing. The scope and magnitude of the modification requested, and the features of the surrounding neighborhood are among the factors that will be taken into account in determining whether a requested accommodation is reasonable.

Q. What is the procedure for requesting a reasonable accommodation?

Where a local zoning scheme specifies procedures for seeking a departure from the general rule, courts have decided, and the Department of Justice and HUD agree, that these procedures must ordinarily be followed. If no procedure is specified, persons with disabilities may, nevertheless, request a reasonable accommodation in some other way, and a local government is obligated to grant it if it meets the criteria discussed above. A local government's failure to respond to a request for reasonable accommodation or an inordinate delay in responding could also violate the Act.

Whether a procedure for requesting accommodations is provided or not, if local government officials have previously made statements or otherwise indicated that an application would not receive fair consideration, or if the procedure itself is discriminatory, then individuals with disabilities living in a group home (and/or its operator) might be able to go directly into court to request an order for an accommodation.

Local governments are encouraged to provide mechanisms for requesting reasonable accommodations that operate promptly and efficiently, without imposing significant costs or delays. The local government should also make efforts to insure that the availability of such mechanisms is well known within the community.

Q. What kinds of health and safety regulations can be imposed upon group homes?

The great majority of group homes for persons with disabilities are subject to state regulations intended to protect the health and safety of their residents. The Department of Justice and HUD believe, as do responsible group home operators, that such licensing schemes are necessary and legitimate. Neighbors who have concerns that a particular group home is being operated inappropriately should be able to bring their concerns to the attention of the responsible licensing agency. We encourage the states

to commit the resources needed to make these systems responsive to resident and community needs and concerns.

Regulation and licensing requirements for group homes are themselves subject to scrutiny under the Fair Housing Act. Such requirements based on health and safety concerns can be discriminatory themselves or may be cited sometimes to disguise discriminatory motives behind attempts to exclude group homes from a community. Regulators must also recognize that not all individuals with disabilities living in group home settings desire or need the same level of services or protection. For example, it may be appropriate to require heightened fire safety measures in a group home for people who are unable to move about without assistance. But for another group of persons with disabilities who do not desire or need such assistance, it would not be appropriate to require fire safety measures beyond those normally imposed on the size and type of residential building involved.

Q. How are zoning and land use matters handled by HUD and the Department of Justice?

The Fair Housing Act gives the Department of Housing and Urban Development the power to receive and investigate complaints of discrimination, including complaints that a local government has discriminated in exercising its land use and zoning powers. HUD is also obligated by statute to attempt to conciliate the complaints that it receives, even before it completes an investigation.

In matters involving zoning and land use, HUD does not issue a charge of discrimination. Instead, HUD refers matters it believes may be meritorious to the Department of Justice which, in its discretion, may decide to bring suit against the respondent in such a case. The Department of Justice may also bring suit in a case that has not been the subject of a HUD complaint by exercising its power to initiate litigation alleging a "pattern or practice" of discrimination or a denial of rights to a group of persons which raises an issue of general public importance.

The Department of Justice's principal objective in a suit of this kind is to remove significant barriers to the housing opportunities available for persons with disabilities. The Department ordinarily will not participate in litigation to challenge discriminatory ordinances which are not being enforced, unless there is evidence that the mere existence of the provisions are preventing or discouraging the development of needed housing.

If HUD determines that there is no reasonable basis to believe that there may be a violation, it will close an investigation without referring the matter to the Department of Justice. Although the Department of Justice would still have independent "pattern or practice" authority to take enforcement action in the matter that was the subject of the closed HUD investigation, that would be an unlikely event. A HUD or Department of Justice decision not to proceed with a zoning or land use matter does not foreclose private plaintiffs from pursuing a claim.

Litigation can be an expensive, time-consuming, and uncertain process for all parties. HUD and the Department of Justice encourage parties to group home disputes to explore all reasonable alternatives to litigation, including alternative dispute resolution procedures, like mediation. HUD attempts to conciliate all Fair Housing Act complaints that it receives. In addition, it is the Department of Justice's policy to offer prospective defendants the opportunity to engage in pre-suit settlement negotiations, except in the most unusual circumstances.

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1. The Fair Housing Act uses the term "handicap." This document uses the term "disability" which has exactly the same legal meaning.
 2. There are groups of unrelated persons with disabilities who choose to live together who do not consider their living arrangements "group homes," and it is inappropriate to consider them "group homes" as that concept is discussed in this statement.