



MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING CENTER

ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE

<https://www.massfairhousing.org/>

Organizational Profile - Massachusetts Fair Housing Center (MFHC)

Context and Mission

The mission of the Massachusetts Fair Housing Center is to eliminate systemic housing discrimination. Established more than 30 years ago, MFHC is the oldest private organization devoted solely to fair housing advocacy in Massachusetts. MFHC serves residents in five counties in Western and Central Massachusetts, with a population of more than two million persons. MFHC takes a multi-faceted approach to achieving its fair housing mission by engaging in public education, fair housing testing investigations, federal and state litigation, housing mobility counseling, and public policy advocacy.

As a full-service fair housing center, MFHC engages in extensive education and outreach to community groups throughout the region, and provides fair housing training to housing industry professionals. MFHC accepts complaints of housing discrimination and maintains an active fair housing testing program to investigate discriminatory practices. When evidence of housing discrimination is found, MFHC's experienced attorneys provide free high-quality legal representation to compensate the victims of discrimination for the harm they have suffered and to deter future acts of discrimination.

MFHC accepts over 300 housing discrimination complaints per year, and, since its inception, it has obtained hundreds of thousands of dollars to compensate victims of housing discrimination. The organization has an excellent reputation for providing high-quality legal services and leading on important policy advocacy efforts.

In addition to this legal work, MFHC provides extensive education and outreach services to community groups, service providers, landlords, realtors, newspapers and others. MFHC has strong partnerships with a range of fair housing and civil rights groups throughout the region and the state.

MFHC's current Executive Director, Meris Bergquist, is retiring after serving as the organization's leader since 2010. Depending on the wishes of the new Executive Director, she is willing to continue to support the organization and assist with the transition.

History

MFHC was founded in 1989 by shelter workers and legal aid attorneys who recognized that unchecked housing discrimination and high rates of racial and ethnic segregation in the region were causing homelessness and unfairly restricting housing choice and mobility. As the oldest fair housing center in the state, MFHC has been at the forefront of the effort to eliminate housing

discrimination in western and central Massachusetts and has engaged in statewide reform efforts as well.

MFHC's performance and sound financial management have been rated "excellent" or "very good" by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on all grants since 2001.

In 2002, MFHC received a national Fair Housing Best Practices award for a predatory lending research project. Our history also includes victories in high profile cases like *Cameron, et al. v. City of Agawam* (2004), when we partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to protect the housing rights of Jamaican farmworkers, and *U.S., et al. v. Choice Properties, Inc.* (1997), where MFHC's testing evidence showed that a realtor used a race-based coding system to deny tenancies to African Americans, Latinos and families with children. This case put the national spotlight on housing discrimination when then HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo addressed it during a press conference in 1997.

Recent Impact

More recently, MFHC's cutting-edge and high-impact work has continued. In December 2019, MFHC filed a groundbreaking civil rights action in federal court challenging the Massachusetts Lead Poisoning and Prevention Act for violating the federal Fair Housing Act through discrimination against families with children under age six. This lawsuit is intended to end housing discrimination against families with children and prevent childhood lead poisoning in Massachusetts.

In 2022, MFHC celebrated the 16th anniversary of our Fair Housing and Civil Rights Conference along with our co-sponsors, Wayfinders, the EEOC, the Boston Housing Authority and the New England University School of Law. MFHC initiated this conference in 2007, and it is now New England's largest regional fair housing event. This year, the event took place over three days and featured keynote speeches by Demetria McCain, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity at HUD, Matthew Desmond, Maurice P. During, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and author of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, and Eleanor Holmes Norton, Congresswoman from the District of Columbia.

Current State of the Organization

MFHC has remained active and relevant for thirty years and has consistently adapted to changes in the legal and funding landscapes. The demand for MFHC's services is increasing, with the number of our intakes doubling from 2021 to 2022. MFHC operates in the most segregated area of the country for Latinos and Whites, and there is huge potential for the organization to increase its impact both in assisting individuals and in addressing systemic discrimination.

MFHC currently has nine staff members and is on a trajectory of growth. The current staff is very passionate about the mission and feels ambitious about moving forward. This year, MFHC began to receive state funding as part of a collaboration among the four fair housing agencies across the state, and this is a significant step forward in coordinating more comprehensive services and

working together to take on state-protected categories in housing discrimination. This funding, along with MFHC's regular support through multiyear HUD grants and legal fees, has provided a solid financial foundation for the organization.

MFHC is proud of the growing impact of our work at the local, state, and national level. Locally, MFHC has a proven track record of providing life-changing free legal services to victims of housing discrimination. Its anti-discrimination work preserves tenancies, avoids homelessness, creates lead-safe housing for children, protects victims of domestic violence and hate crimes, provides greater housing opportunities for recipients of rental assistance, and allows people with disabilities to enjoy equal access to housing and the ability to live with greater independence and dignity.

At the state level, MFHC has been engaged in significant policy work by supporting laws that would eliminate systemic forms of housing discrimination against families with children as well as other proposed legislation that would affirmatively further fair housing.

At the national level, MFHC successfully joined forces with another legal advocacy group, Lawyers for Civil Rights, in 2020 to challenge the federal government's attempt to implement a new rule that would have made it nearly impossible for individuals and attorneys to challenge housing policies that appear neutral on their face, but that have an unjustified discriminatory effect. As a result of this collaboration, the United States District Court District of Massachusetts entered a nationwide injunction to stop the new rule from going into effect on October 25, 2020. *Massachusetts Fair Housing Center v. HUD*, 496 F. Supp. 3d 600 (D. Mass. 2020).

MFHC's current HUD grant funding cycle ends May 15, 2023. This executive transition will take place during a time of secured funding.

Future Opportunities

MFHC is a respected agency with good relationships within the legislature, which has created new opportunities for policy advocacy at the state level. MFHC completed a strategic planning process in 2018 to establish goals and directions for the future. The plan has served the organization well, and a new executive director will help lead the development of a new plan once that person has become acclimated to the leadership role.

Moving forward, it is expected that the organization will continue to maintain a balance between serving individual cases and pursuing systemic reforms. The housing crisis that emerged during the pandemic has created an increasing awareness of the impact of housing discrimination on vulnerable individuals who are unjustly denied access to housing, which is a fundamental human need. MFHC fills an otherwise unmet need and acts as a force for greater inclusivity and housing justice. MFHC's future holds great potential for strengthening existing partnerships and developing new ones to increase impact and to raise more funds.