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Coalition of Neighborhood and Housing Organizations Files Fair Housing Complaint Against Minneapolis and Saint Paul

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TWIN CITIES – A coalition of Minneapolis neighborhood and housing organizations filed a complaint Monday with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), charging that the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul are violating the Fair Housing Act and other federal civil rights laws. The Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing (MICAH), Folwell Neighborhood Association, Webber-Camden Neighborhood Organization, and Whittier Alliance Neighborhood Association all contend that the region's two largest cities have contributed to housing segregation and unequal opportunity across the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

According to the complaint, Minneapolis and Saint Paul have intentionally concentrated affordable rental housing, in which families of color frequently live, in neighborhoods that are segregated, and neighborhoods that are currently diverse and in danger of resegregating. Within the two cities, 85 percent of affordable rental units are located in these neighborhoods, dramatically reducing many of the cities' residents' access to living-wage jobs and a broad range of educational options. The complainants also assert that the cities have intentionally ignored major federal civil rights requirements designed to ensure equal housing opportunity, on which HUD conditions a number of the cities' annual funding sources. These practices deprive Minnesotans of the benefits of residing in racially and economically diverse settings, and place integrated areas at risk of becoming racially isolated.

"As people of faith, we believe we are to love and treat others as ourselves, and that everyone, without exception, should have a decent, safe, accessible, and affordable home," said Sue Watlov Phillips, MICAH's executive director.

"It's a matter of economic justice," said Reverend Linda Koelman, chair of the Webber-Camden Neighborhood Organization. "Everyone should be able to have a choice as to where they live."

Marian Biehn, executive director of the Whittier Alliance, expressed hope that the complaint would spur policy action by the cities: "The Whittier Alliance has long been an advocate for a change in affordable housing policy, and we hope this complaint will give decision makers the courage and the information to recognize and remedy the inequity of current policies."

Other members of the community expressed support for the complaint, and hoped that better integration would revitalize the neighborhoods in which they lived. "I grew up in North Minneapolis in the 70s and 80s and I had hoped that the neighborhood would be thriving by now," said Julianne Leerssen, executive director of the Neighborhood Hub Organization. "This can only happen if we begin to reverse the trend of concentrating poverty."

This is the second fair housing complaint to which MICAH has been a principal party in recent months. In November, the organization joined the cities of Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, and Richfield in filing a complaint against the Metropolitan Council and the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency. The earlier filing made similar claims, asserting that the two state agencies are intentionally concentrating affordable rental homes in segregated neighborhoods, and insulating affluent suburbs from their legal requirement to provide a "fair share" of affordable housing. A number of Minnesota state senators and legislators have offered their support for the earlier complaint, which has been accepted by HUD and is currently being investigated.

The two complaints have been brought under the Fair Housing Act, a landmark civil rights law passed in 1968 in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale was a chief sponsor of the Act, and his call for “truly integrated and balanced living patterns” has proven instrumental in the Act’s implementation. The law prohibits discrimination and segregation in housing, and municipalities who choose to receive funding from the federal government take proactive steps to further fair housing.

The complainants are represented by Michael Allen, a partner in the civil rights law firm Relman, Dane & Colfax.