

Madison Equal Opportunities Commission – Helene Nelson – June 15, 2017

- 1) Thank you so much for focusing on housing as an equity issue. It's an equity issue because of historical racism and policy factors causing today's disparities -- and because today's racial disparities in many areas cannot be remedied without a base of stable housing for individuals and families. For example, stable housing for families is a necessary ingredient in a two-generation strategy to overcome disparities in the health and education outcomes for children of color.
- 2) I am here with Sheray Wallace, a community activist in Meadowood. I seek to support Sheray and people in the Meadowood area who are struggling with the rental housing crisis.

Large scale lease non-renewals in Meadowood and nearby areas highlight the fact that there's simply not enough housing that people can afford, regardless of any individual or family problems or issues. Very poor families, especially families of color and any people with past problems of credit, tenant issues or criminal records are increasingly excluded. Families are churning in and out of homelessness and housing instability – beyond the formal counts of homeless people known to the homeless service system. And that system is under siege itself- many times, all it can offer families is a waiting list or advice to live homeless to become eligible for shelter later.

- 3) As you know, achieving housing stability for families is a complicated goal – on a family-by-family level and in a community and system context. This is heart-breaking. We can't be excused from considering how we each can be part of the solution by the facts that the problem is complicated and hard, and that we don't have all the answers or resources to address the problems.
 - a) My own role here is that of a member of a church in southwest Madison, as a volunteer. The church has sought to build supportive relationships with neighbors in Meadowood and in response to concerns we've learned, we have offered financial aid to families who are struggling to stay in housing, or to re-enter housing after leases are non-renewed or evictions, or to replace section 8 financial aid when it is cut off and children are suffering unfairly as a result.
 - b) Story example: one family where a criminal offense by the father would have created homelessness for the mother and young children, absent a kind landlord and church donors who continued to support them in housing when section 8 was terminated.
- 4) From my prior work experience in county and state government, I understand the challenges local government faces with respect to addressing the overall rental housing crisis. There are limits on what we can do, but there are positive things to do.
 - a) I appreciate the City's and County's investment in projects to build more affordable housing and fund housing first initiatives. The more that can be done in this area the better.

- b) Similarly, the more we can work positively with private landlords to help them keep existing affordable housing, the better.
- c) I am personally interested in and working on ways to increase financial help to struggling families such as rent subsidies. We've started doing some of this in our church and there is more that can be done.
- d) I also encourage those in the City who are interested in taking a careful look at City programs helping poor families like Section 8 and public housing – asking what policies and practices and partnerships could be changed to achieve the goal of preserving and supporting struggling families. If this were a serious goal it would take partnerships beyond what the City could do alone, and I believe there are partners willing to help the City if you wish to take this on.
 - i) I encourage planning of a pilot project using a restorative justice frame for families at risk or subject to section 8 termination or eviction from public housing.
 - ii) Less formally, it would be possible to build a coordinated response team approach to families who are being non-renewed from housing and who need help and flexibility maintaining their voucher and re-entering housing, or some form of services to preserve housing and existing supports (example: mental health or employment issues). I know some Joining Forces for Families social workers who would be eager to work on developing this kind of process.
 - iii) I have also heard and support the ideas that advocates have for changing some of the City CDA and section 8 policies to be more family-friendly. Others can speak to this more particularly. But from listening to them, it seems to me there are at least a few areas of “low hanging fruit” where changes in policies and practices would be viable.