

Testimony of Elaine Gross, President, ERASE Racism  
In Support of Legislative Item #292-06  
July 24, 2006

**Introduction**

Good afternoon. I am Elaine Gross, President of ERASE Racism based in Syosset, Nassau County. I have 23 years experience in housing and racial equity issues in Boston, New York City and Long Island. In 1983 I received a Master of Social Work degree from Boston University with a focus in policy and planning. I've worked for Sustainable America a national organization analyzing global policies and I've worked at the Boston Housing Partnership a local organization working in collaboration with community development organizations to establish local policies and programs to revive fragile inner city neighborhoods. For these experiences as well as my current regional policy advocacy work at ERASE Racism, I have identified and addressed (or my focus has been to identify and address) the policies, practices and structures that perpetuate institutional and structural racial inequities.

In April 2005, ERASE Racism released its report "Long Island Fair Housing: A State of Inequity," which was the result of a 2 year study on the fair housing laws and enforcement systems that affect Long Islanders. Our report exposed that both Nassau and Suffolk County Human Rights Commissions had opted out of enforcing fair housing. Specifically, Nassau County had a fair housing law on the books, but lacked procedural laws and mechanisms to make enforcement possible. The report also exposed how inefficient and ineffective both the federal and New York State Division of Human Rights enforcement systems were in enforcing fair housing laws. Unfortunately NYSDHR, the agency that has the greatest responsibility for prosecuting fair housing cases in Nassau County, is plagued with a legacy of under-serving victims of housing discrimination. Attempts by citizens statewide to amend the Division's lethargic practices and policies have yet to prove fruitful.

As a result of ERASE Racism's findings, County Executive Suozzi publicly denounced housing discrimination and made a commitment to craft new fair housing legislation with ERASE Racism. The legislation before you is the result of a truly collaborative effort between Nassau County and ERASE Racism's legislative team. It offers Nassau residents strong substantive law and local enforcement options that represent the kind of protection all Nassau residents deserve. The legislation is the result of many hours of consultation with experts on fair housing, enforcement, policy and the law. The ERASE Racism Legislative Team members include: Howard Glickstein, Esq., former dean of Touro Law School and one of the drafters of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964; Craig Gurian, Esq., executive director, anti-Discrimination Center of Metro New York, an acclaimed New York civil rights attorney with extensive legislative experience; Cathryn Harris, project manager of ERASE Racism and myself.

**Need for Local Fair Housing Enforcement**

Dr. John Logan, Professor of Sociology at Brown University and former Director of the Lewis Mumford Center in Comparative Urban and Regional Research, is a nationally recognized expert on pattern and trends in racial residential segregation. His written testimony is provided in his

absence. Dr. Logan's statistics provide evidence that the federal and State fair housing enforcement systems have failed to deter segregation on Long Island. For example the segregation index, which is on a scale of 0 to 100, has changed very little over the past 30 years on Long Island:

1980 = 77.6

1990 = 77.2

2000 = 74.4

The Nassau-Suffolk level of 74.4 makes this the third most segregated suburban region in the country when measuring black/white segregation.

The affects of segregation on the Community of Color is devastating and prevents many people from having equal access to opportunities. There is a myth that people of color cannot afford to live in the neighborhoods they would like to reside. This is simply not the case. Many African American people who are affluent are still steered into predominately non-white neighborhoods and are only offered homes to purchase that are below the level they can afford. They are systematically denied access to the more affluent neighborhoods where predominantly white people live. Such neighborhoods usually have better schools and access to resources. Residential segregation equals unequal access to opportunity.

**Dr. Logan illustrates this point with the following study:**

Dr. Logan compared the neighborhood qualities of the average black household on Long Island with an income of over \$60,000 with those of the average white household with an income of under \$30,000. "This is a large enough difference that most of us would expect to find that the affluent black households live in much more desirable neighborhoods than the much poorer white households."

- The median income of their neighbors was actually \$60,857 for affluent blacks and \$66,316 for poorer whites.
- The poverty rate in their neighborhood was 9.6% for affluent blacks and 5.7% for poorer whites.
- 21.9% of the affluent blacks' neighbors had a college degree, compared to 29.9% of poorer whites.

"These results speak for themselves. For black Long Islanders, living in segregated neighborhoods means living in unequal neighborhoods."

Local fair housing enforcement is needed to address these illegal actions that create harsh, real and inequitable results. A local enforcement system will allow for easier access for victims of housing discrimination and more rapid results.

Unfortunately, ERASE Racism has found through antidotal evidence and case review that many of the illegal fair housing violations that occur in Nassau County are blatant and intentional. A fully functioning local enforcement system will act as a deterrent for potential violators because victims will have local help in addressing the illegal activities.

Furthermore, as Howard Glickstein, one of the principal authors of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, who was unable to be here today but has submitted written testimony states:

“When Congress passed Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—the Fair Employment Law—and Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968—the Fair Housing Law—great emphasis was placed on providing a role for state and local governments in the enforcement of these laws. Congress’ theory was that compliance with employment and housing laws was best effectuated on the level of local government. . . . the effective enforcement of these laws on the local level is most likely to ensure extensive compliance. What has been needed in Nassau County for some time was a structure to enforce effectively housing discrimination laws. This body can provide that structure by enacting Legislative Item #292-06.”

Mr. Glickstein also reminds us that civil rights has always been a bi-partisan issue.

“The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 was shepherded through the United States Senate by Republican Everett Dirksen of Illinois and Democrat Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and through the House of Representative by Republican William McCulloch of Ohio and Democrat Emmanuel Celler of New York. Support for fair housing laws has been bipartisan as well. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 was passed by Congress with substantial bipartisan majorities in both houses. In the Senate, the legislation was approved by 71.2% of the Democrats and 90.6% of the Republicans. In the House, the break down was 63% Democrats and 54.3% Republicans. One of the members of the House of Representatives to vote for the law was then Congressman George H.W.Bush.”

Bush made a statement regarding how it seemed fundamental that a man should not have a door slammed in his face because of the color of his skin or because he speaks with an accent.

ERASE Racism urges each of you to follow in this tradition of bipartisan support for fair housing laws and vote in favor of this landmark legislation before you. By supporting Legislative Item #292-06, the Nassau County Legislature will take the first big step toward creating racial equity in housing and opportunities, while providing all Nassau residents with the protections and the local avenues for redress they deserve. This is an opportunity for Nassau County Legislators to send a clear message to fair housing violators that such illegal activity will not be tolerated in this County. Your support for this Fair Housing Legislation will certainly resonate with each of your constituents who have been or will become a victim of illegal housing discrimination. It will also resonate with each of your constituents who believe that in 2006 racial discrimination has no place in Nassau County and that doing nothing sends a loud message that housing discrimination will continue to be tolerated. ERASE Racism is proud to have been a catalyst for

this groundbreaking legislation. We are grateful for all of those who have come before us, locally and nationally, to courageously challenge the status quo and to systematically put forth and enforce civil rights laws. ERASE Racism and its Board of Directors strongly encourages each of you to vote in favor of Legislative Item #292-06.