



**Opening Remarks of Elaine Gross, President of ERASE Racism
At a Media Event with New York State Lt. Governor Brian Benjamin
December 28, 2021**

Good morning. I'm Elaine Gross, President and CEO of the civil rights organization ERASE Racism. We've worked for 20 years to increase fair housing, drawing on our research into ongoing housing discrimination in Nassau and Suffolk Counties on Long Island – as well as the deficiencies of the State agencies responsible for enforcing fair housing laws and licensing real estate professionals.

I'm pleased to welcome everyone to this important event celebrating the signing of new fair housing legislation. Collectively, these laws provide a clear path to reduce widespread housing discrimination in New York.

Let me start by thanking Governor Kathy Hochul for signing these bills and turning them into law. Let me also thank Lt. Governor Brian Benjamin for organizing this event to highlight these crucial State actions and set the stage for their implementation.

I also want to acknowledge the elected officials who are joining the event this morning.

Senator Kevin Thomas
Senator Anna Kaplan
Senator Jim Gaughran
Senator Brian Kavanagh
Senator James Skoufis
Assemblymember Michaelle Solages
Assemblymember Kimberly Jean-Pierre
Assemblymember Judy Griffin
Assemblymember Gina Sillitti
Assemblymember Catalina Cruz
Meghan Faux, Chief Deputy Attorney General, Office of the NYS Attorney General

Housing discrimination is not just a part of New York's past; it's a very active part of New York's present. Our responsibility is to reduce and eliminate it from New York's future.

The signing of these bills ends the legislative process and starts the administrative process. These laws must be enforced rigorously and relentlessly to dismantle housing discrimination.

Twenty years ago, I founded ERASE Racism and made housing discrimination an immediate priority for three reasons: First, it's a disgrace that undercuts the fundamental promise of our nation: to establish justice, as stated in the opening sentence of the US Constitution. Second, it determines not only where we live, but where children attend school, whether we have access to jobs and healthcare, and how exposed we are to environmental harm, among other conditions. Third, it's especially insidious because most victims are unaware. They have no way of knowing, for example, that white people are shown properties in majority-white communities and people of color are shown properties in racially mixed or segregated communities. Some people of color are denied access to listings or not shown housing at all.

So how did we get here? Starting eight years ago, ERASE Racism filed lawsuits in [Nassau](#) and [Suffolk](#) Counties against property owners and management companies that were showing rental apartments to white applicants and not to African Americans. Those lawsuits were successfully resolved. The owner of *Newsday* subsequently called me to ask what he could do. I recommended that he do what we did—use paired testing to see if trained testers seeking the same housing were treated the same.

You know what happened next? The findings from *Newsday's* landmark 2019 report "Long Island Divided" demonstrated that housing discrimination remains widespread. It was the impetus for the Chairs of three State Senate Committees to hold two joint hearings into housing discrimination and produce a report that led to the legislation that we celebrate today.

I, therefore, thank our colleagues at the Fair Housing Justice Center – as well as the New York State Fair Housing Network and its ardent champion Enterprise Community Partners – for their partnership in advocating for fair housing. I thank *Newsday* – its owner, publisher, editors, and reporters – for their landmark investigation, which could not be ignored. I thank the three State Senate Committee Chairs – Brian Kavanagh, James Skoufis, and Kevin Thomas – for their leadership on this issue. I thank Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie and Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins for seeing that this legislation was adopted.

As we celebrate today's victory, we must recognize that housing discrimination is a manifestation of the structural racism that has defined and continues to define our state and nation. Those structural impediments can only be removed by systemic change that upends the policies and practices that maintain housing discrimination and the inequalities generated.

Collectively these laws recognize this. They lay out systematic actions and policies that hold individual realtors and real estate firms accountable for fair housing in new ways. Ignorance

and implicit bias are not an excuse, and firms must supervise their agents and establish standardized procedures. New York State must actively further fair housing. It's not acceptable to wait for victims. A housing fund to proactively identify discriminators through paired testing is the only way to stem the tide of discrimination. All state agencies and local municipalities and their agencies must take concrete actions to fight ongoing housing discrimination and segregation as required by the Fair Housing Act and now reaffirmed by the State. That means housing should help build racially integrated communities rather than add to the severe racial segregation that was initially instigated by federal and local government actions.

Systemic change must reaffirm our nation's commitment to justice and underpin equality.

As we proceed to implement these new laws, we must see today not only as a victory but as a wake-up call. While these new laws are vital, much more work remains to be done.

Let's together seize the opportunities to address structural racism in 2022 and build a future that is fair, just, and equitable for all New Yorkers.

Now, I would like to introduce a person who has been a leading voice for fair housing in New York State. As a builder, community board chair, and legislator, he has dedicated a significant portion of his life to the creation and preservation of affordable housing. He presided over the Senate during the passage of historic rent reform, sponsoring bills to prevent landlords from making significant increases on rent-stabilized apartments. Throughout his entire career, he has been a strong advocate for equity and affordability. Please welcome New York State Lieutenant Governor Brian Benjamin.

For media inquiries, contact Henry Miller - hmill@highimpactpartnering.com