

December 14, 2006

To the Editor:

On November 28, 2006, the Bridgeport Borough Council adopted copy-cat anti-immigrant legislation modeled on Hazelton's Illegal Immigration Relief Act which prohibits landlords from renting to undocumented immigrants. The ordinance makes it illegal for landlords to rent to persons without proper "occupancy permits" and imposes stiff fines for violators. In addition to the Illegal Immigration Relief Act, Bridgeport also passed an Official English-Only Ordinance and a Residential Rental Ordinance, both of which are tied to issues of immigration. Bridgeport's actions came despite the fact that Hazelton's Illegal Immigration Relief Act is currently being challenged in U.S. District Court and without waiting for a decision on the validity of such municipal actions.

It appears that Norristown, a neighboring municipality, has opted to move in a different direction. On November 14, 2006, the Times Herald referenced Mr. Bill Procyson, President of the Norristown Borough Council, who recognized that the "Mexican community is becoming integral to Norristown". Mr. Procyson stated that instead of alienating the community, Norristown is interested in seeking solutions that will better integrate the Hispanic population. As a result, the Norristown Borough Council has decided that they will not be pursuing similar ordinances to the ones adopted by Bridgeport and Hazelton.

In addition, the Montgomery County Commissioners have publicly stated that the County believes that immigration policy is a matter for the federal government, not for local municipalities.

The Fair Housing Council of Montgomery County is a non-profit organization with a mission to ensure equal housing opportunities regardless of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or age (over 40). In September 2006, the Council advised Bridgeport of its concerns about the discriminatory impact that the ordinances could have on individuals, including U.S. citizens and legal residents, in obtaining housing. The Council expressed concern that the ordinances could potentially incite racial and ethnic tensions within Bridgeport and surrounding areas since the ordinances are so clearly aimed at Spanish speaking persons, which could result in escalating numbers of hate crimes.

On December 3, 2006 the Fair Housing Council and ACLAMO Family Centers sponsored a community forum to educate the public about the provisions of the ordinances and to address concerns and questions. A representative from the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia was there to answer specific questions of the approximately 50 community members who were in attendance. Ultimately, many concluded that numerous questions remain unanswered by the Bridgeport Borough.

- What measures are in place for those who are here legally but who do not have identification documents - such as victims of domestic violence who have fled their homes, persons with disabilities coming out of institutions or hospitalization, persons who are leaving homelessness or in transitional housing, foreign nationals whose paperwork is in the process of renewal, victims of theft or fire, etc.?

- How will the Borough handle situations in which an undocumented person has an existing lease, which is bound by the state Landlord Tenant Law? Will the landlord have the right to allow the individual(s) to remain in the unit until the end of the lease term or will landlords be forced to break the lease and violate the provisions of the state law in order to comply with the local ordinance?
- How will the Borough ensure that landlords will comply with the Landlord Tenant law and return security deposits for those who must leave the Borough as a result of implementation of these ordinances ?
- How does the Borough plan to execute the overwhelming administrative tasks of registering both landlords and renters, as well as accurately determine a person's legal status given that the federal system in place is unreliable and slow?
- What will the Borough do if the courts decide that the ordinances are unconstitutional and illegal? Do Borough residents know that the Borough could be liable for its actions? Also, how will Bridgeport ensure landlords that they will not be liable for any discriminatory actions that they undertook in complying with the ordinance?
- When will the ordinances be implemented? How will people be informed?

However, perhaps the most resounding concern raised was about the lack of information provided to the community, and particularly to renters and landlords, by the Bridgeport Borough. Many people were not only unaware of the ordinances prior to attending the forum, but they also did not understand why Bridgeport has made no efforts to inform them of the provisions of the ordinances and the impact they will have on Bridgeport's residents, landlords, and businesses. We have asked Bridgeport to address the concerns and questions raised by the community.

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 Fair Housing Council of Montgomery County