



Fair Housing: Beyond Codes and Suite of Updated Model Regulations

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The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission hosted two workshops on November 9th and 12th, titled *Fair Housing: Beyond Codes*. The objective of these workshops was to provide information and raise awareness of the issues surrounding Fair Housing, Building Codes and Inclusionary Zoning. These three separate concepts offer different means of addressing a single widespread social concern: that not everyone can access housing of basic standards. The federal Fair Housing Act emphasizes the right to housing for people historically denied due to innate characteristics, such as race, sex, familial status, color, religion, ethnicity and disability. The act defines these seven characteristics as the *protected classes* that form the foundation for most fair housing legislation.

The two workshops were a partnership with North Penn Legal Services, the Counties of Northampton and Lehigh, the Cities of Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton, and Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley to raise awareness of fair housing rights and responsibilities among staff, elected officials, housing professionals and the general public. The two workshops were not only the first time a major agency had convened regionwide partners on the subject, but they are particularly cogent in light of the June 2015 Supreme Court *Inclusionary Communities* decision, which interprets the Fair Housing Act more strictly, as well as the fact that several municipalities in the Valley have been party to allegations of Fair Housing Act violations. The workshops provided an intimate setting for participants to learn about the history and latest developments on Fair Housing at the regional, state and federal levels.

In total, the two workshops attracted over 50 attendees. Both the evening workshop on the 9th and the lunchtime workshop on the 12th generated a lively discussion and thought provoking questions. Among the key concerns were that, in this day and age, many—if not most—violations come from people being unaware of what the provisions are, rather than a blatant disregard for them (as was the case in the past). The workshops helped identify the type of citations typical today, ranging from placing a rental office down a flight of stairs (making it inaccessible for persons with disabilities) to a municipality adopting zoning provisions that treat group homes differently from other multifamily housing. The audience appreciated the way the presentation distinguished fair housing from affordable housing, the latter of which correlates directly to inclusionary zoning. Additionally, the presentation explained the role building codes (consisting in Pennsylvania of the statewide Uniform Construction Code) also address a variety of fair housing considerations, particularly regarding accessibility and reasonable accommodations.

In addition to the workshops, the LVPC has updated several model regulations released in previous years. The update of the Inclusionary Zoning model regulation prompted the LVPC to revisit several of the other model ordinances, which were then updated and revised. The model regulations in general are among the LVPC's most popular smaller publications; all are available on the website, and some of them rank among the top documents in terms of the number of online "hits". This "suite" of new and improved model regulations and guidance documents include the following reports:

- Conservation Subdivisions
- Cottage Housing Development
- Density Bonuses/Minimum Density
- Mixed Uses
- Traditional Neighborhood Development
- Street Connectivity

All seven of these reports are available through a centralized link at the LVPC website:
<http://www.lvpc.org/c-guides---model-regs.html>

Both the fair housing workshops and the additional reports reflect the LVPC's continued commitment to bringing the latest in planning, design and policy strategies that help the Lehigh Valley's municipalities prepare for growth and change in the future.