



April 11, 1968: President Lyndon Johnson signs the Fair Housing Act.

## NATIONAL FAIR HOUSING ALLIANCE COMMEMORATES 40<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF FAIR HOUSING ACT

On April 4, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, unleashing a firestorm of civil unrest in urban communities across the nation. A week to the day after Dr. King's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the federal Fair Housing Act (Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968). The law, co-sponsored by Senators Walter Mondale and Edward Brooke, had been languishing in Congress for two years; it passed only in response to the assassination and subsequent events. Many people forget that Dr. King focused heavily on fair housing issues with a keen recognition of what costs our society would pay for continued patterns of segregated living. Passage of the Fair Housing Act was a fitting, if inadequate, tribute to his memory.

As laws go, the Fair Housing Act better represented the intent of Congress that we achieve "truly integrated and balanced living patterns" than the practical necessities of achieving such patterns. Given the centuries-old practices of discrimination and denial of opportunity, founded in a legacy of slavery and government policy, the law was only a starting point in our nation's efforts to achieve equal housing. It relied primarily on voluntarily compliance and private enforcement of its mandates.

In 1988, the law was amended by the Fair Housing Amendments Act, co-sponsored by Senators Edward Kennedy and Arlen Specter. This law significantly strengthened the enforcement powers of the Act, giving the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Justice the authority and mandate to enforce the expanded and comprehensive requirements of the law while still providing for a private enforcement

mechanism. The Fair Housing Act is now one of the most powerful tools in our civil rights arsenal. But a tool is only effective when wielded with skill and intent, and there is ample evidence of a failure on the part of the federal government to wield this tool effectively.

Today, we commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Fair Housing Act. We commemorate, not celebrate, because we are still so far from achieving the balanced and integrated living patterns envisioned by the original Act's authors. While we have made some progress in reducing levels of residential segregation, most Americans live in communities largely divided by race and ethnicity. There are at least *four million* acts of housing discrimination every year. And we are on the brink of an economic crisis fueled by a failed subprime lending market, a market built primarily on borrowers and neighborhoods of color. The current foreclosure crisis is the embodiment of a history of discrimination in housing, lending, and insurance markets and reeks of both the complicity and failure of the federal government.

This week, NFHA released its *2008 Fair Housing Trends* Report which provides insight into our nation's struggles to achieve the benefits of living in richly diverse communities. We have come only a small way in attaining those benefits and must rededicate ourselves with intensity and determination to make fair housing a reality for all. [Click here to read the report.](#)

