



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT  
THE SECRETARY  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20410-0001

October 21, 1994

Dear participants in the first national conference on housing mobility:

I regret that I am unable to join you today as you explore the promise of housing mobility as an avenue of economic opportunity. There are millions of families in America today who want to lift themselves out of poverty, but who have no real options where they live. For them, poverty has become as much a matter of geography as personal circumstance. The discussions you are conducting on developing and implementing housing mobility programs, and linking them with education, child care, jobs and job training, and transportation--so housing mobility can truly become a path to a better life--are tremendously important.

Moreover, the discussion in which you are engaged cuts directly to heart of who we are as a nation. Are we a nation that wants to reach out to others in need, to give them a real chance to succeed? I believe we are.

I believe this, because that has been my experience as a mayor, and, for the last 21 months, as Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. My faith in the fundamental compassion of the American people is reaffirmed every time I leave Washington.

As you know, this week President Clinton asked me to go to Houston to coordinate flood-relief efforts there. At times like this, when a major disaster strikes, it's not uncommon to see complete strangers reaching out to each other, drawn together by their common plight. I've seen it over and over: in the floods in the Midwest last year; in Los Angeles after the earthquake last January; and now, in Southeast Texas.

These terrible, natural disasters literally bring out the best in people. And--at a time when newspaper, radio and TV analysts, and the pollsters, are constantly telling us that the electorate is angry, even to the point of surliness--these events remind us of the fundamental decency of the American people.

Those of us who serve in public office--elective or appointive--must never lose sight of this basic truth: Americans are caring people; they want to see others do well; they want to help when they can. In public life, it is our challenge, and our responsibility, to appeal to people's best instincts--so that the

compassion people naturally show one another in the face of extreme hardship becomes second nature to public policy and action.

Those of you who work in the community to help others lift themselves to better lives understand the need to touch people's compassionate core. You understand that the success of your efforts depends on the good will of many people who have no direct stake in your success.

This is particularly true of your efforts to ensure housing choice, and to help people obtain decent, affordable housing throughout our greater metropolitan areas.

I want to commend all of you not only for your involvement in this conference but for the vital work you're already doing to enable people to move to communities where there are good schools, job opportunities, decent public services, parks and other recreational outlets, and safe streets. I especially want to commend you for the sensitivity you bring to your work, as you undertake the sometimes difficult task of opening doors of opportunity in new communities for people who have been shut out and cut off from America's mainstream.

We at the Federal level are counting on you to lead the way. You know your communities; you know all the players; you know best how to touch that core of decency in your communities.

And today, more than ever before, we must all find ways to tap that well of good will. For we are all being challenged as never before.

In recent months, our efforts to promote housing mobility and opportunity have come under assault. They've been misrepresented. False apprehensions have been raised about them. And some people have sought to manipulate these apprehensions for their own purposes.

No matter how we feel about these tactics, no matter how misplaced we believe the apprehensions they raise are, we must understand that once raised, these concerns about housing mobility initiatives are honestly felt by people.

So we must not become caught up in strident rhetoric. We must not add fuel to the fire of polarizing debate. Our challenge is to respond to people's concerns calmly, quietly, and with respect for their feelings, and with the understanding that housing mobility initiatives are freighted with potentially big changes for everyone.

We know, from our own experience, that when we go about our work this way, things have a way of working out.

We've seen how things can work out in the Chicago metropolitan area, where, under the Gautreaux program, more than 5,500 families have moved from high-poverty, inner-city public housing to middle-class suburban communities, without incident. They've been accepted into their new communities, and they have thrived.

We've seen how things can work out, even in an emotionally charged situation -- in Vidor, Texas. The Vidor community that was in the national spotlight a little over a year ago, because African Americans were literally run out of public housing there. HUD took over the public housing authority in Vidor a year ago last month. Four months later, four African American families moved into Vidor's public housing. We spent a lot of time with the community, preparing the way for those families. We found many people of good will in Vidor--people who resented the bad press and the national notoriety the town had received. They wanted to work with us.

Today, 21 African American families are living peacefully alongside their white neighbors in Vidor's public housing. The community's fundamental decency has prevailed. Things are working out in Vidor.

The lesson of Gautreaux, the lesson of Vidor, Texas, is clear: As long as we remain free of rancor, calm in spirit and steady of purpose, housing mobility can work.

I want to assure you that this Administration will remain steady of purpose in supporting you in your important work.

The Moving to Opportunity demonstration initiative is not in jeopardy. It is on track in New York, Baltimore, Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago. Families are being recruited and screened for participation, and we will be monitoring their progress closely over the next 10 years. This carefully designed demonstration project will provide valuable lessons about the effectiveness of Gautreaux-style mobility counseling, and about the difference a move from low-poverty neighborhoods can make in the lives of poor families and their children.

I strongly believe that our partners in these critical demonstrations are going to prove, as Gautreaux has already shown, that mobility works in many settings--not only for the families who move, but for the entire community.

We remain committed to the Choice in Residency initiative, which would--through counseling--make housing choice real for all Section 8 rent-subsidy recipients. We sought Congressional authorization for this initiative this year, but our authorizing legislation stalled in the closing days of Congress. However, money was appropriated for a second round of Moving to Opportunity. And while we will not be doing additional MTO sites, we are exploring ways to use these funds to put the

concept behind Choice in Residency into practice, and we're committed to seeing this go forward in 1995.

Real housing choice and mobility ultimately depend on the availability of affordable housing. And this Administration has already taken a number of steps to increase the nation's stock of affordable housing.

Last year, President Clinton secured Congressional approval for permanent extension of low-income housing tax credits and mortgage revenue bonds. These actions have ensured a continuing flow of private credit for affordable housing investment. They have secured a financial environment favorable to affordable housing development.

At HUD, we've entered into partnerships with State and local housing finance agencies, pension funds and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac--the nation's two largest secondary market lenders--to boost production of affordable, multifamily rental housing.

We have an estimated shortfall of 4.1 million affordable housing units in this country, and we understand that we cannot truly increase housing choice and mobility unless we also take aggressive action to reduce this terrible shortage.

So we have acted, and we will continue to act, to ensure that there is in fact housing available to the lower-income families you seek to help.

We are counting on you to persuade local communities to make new affordable housing construction part of their general development plans--just as Montgomery County has done, here in the Washington, D.C. greater metropolitan area.

I am confident that you can do that. And I am confident that together, we can appeal to the American people's fundamental sense of decency and fair play and make this country a better place to live for all our people.

Sincerely,

  
Henry G. Cisneros