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Washtenaw United: Housing discrimination remains a problem in Washtenaw County and the region

By **David Fair - Retired**

Published April 27, 2026 at 5:56 AM EDT

LISTEN • 11:10

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Morning Edition



Fair Housing Center Of Southeast & Mid Michigan / Fhcmichigan.Org

Kristen Cuhran, Executive Director of the Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan.

ABOUT KRISTEN CUHRAN:

Kristen J. Cuhran is the Executive Director of the Fair Housing Center of Southeast & Mid Michigan. She's been with the organization since 2005, serving in every capacity from investigator to administrator. Kristen has dedicated her career to upholding the fair housing rights of the residents of Southeast and Mid Michigan.

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David Fair: This is 89.1 WEMU, and welcome to our weekly conversation on equity and opportunity in our community. I'm David Fair, and we call it Washtenaw United. Now, it's hard enough to find housing these days. Price and location can be real issues. For all too many, there's another hurdle to jump, and that's discrimination. It's real, and you can find examples across Washtenaw County, our region and the rest of Michigan. The Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid Michigan has made it a mission to end housing discrimination and to promote integrated and accessible communities. But there's a lot of work to be done. Kristen Cuhran is Executive Director of the Fair Housing Center. And thanks for making time to talk with us today! I'm most grateful!

Kristen Cuhran: Thank you so much for having me!

David Fair: When I first started talking with leadership of your organization, it was known as the Fair Housing Center of Washtenaw County. Then about 10 years ago, it changed its name to the Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid Michigan. Kristen, was that change made because of the growing need, or is this an area of focus that has been underserved all along, or a little of both?

Kristen Cuhran: That's a great question! The organization was started by my predecessor, the founder, Pam Kish, and other community members in 1992 as, like you said, the Fair Housing Center of Washtenaw County. There was a greater need. We saw other areas of southeast and mid-Michigan that didn't have protection, so we were able to expand at one point to include Lenawee and Monroe. And then, now, as you said, we covered 10 counties in Michigan. I do want to point out that, just last year to give you some reference, we took 211 complaints in our entire service area, but 65% were from Washtenaw County. So, we do have a very large presence here and a great need.

David Fair: Bringing it to today, how is inflation, cost of living, and lack of wage increases playing into the problem of housing discrimination?

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Kristen Cuhran: That's a great question! We definitely see that it's harder, in general, for anyone to find housing. We have seen an increase in complaints from disability, but also, thanks to Ann Arbor's new source of income protections and now the state of Michigan's source of income protections, which includes everything from veteran vouchers, Section 8 vouchers, we can see that more folks are needing to use those vouchers, and they're being told they can't use those vouchers. So, inflation and housing costs have definitely caused an increase in calls for our office in this area.

David Fair: So, you've touched on it, but I want to get a little more specific. How are the federal actions to dismantle diversity, equity and inclusion programs impacting the frequency with which you're seeing housing discrimination complaints?

Kristen Cuhran: So, I would say that the actual frequency is pretty consistent. Still, we do find that people, because of the potential loss of enforcement, which is what my office does, we enforce the Federal Fair Housing Act, the state laws and then local laws, because there is less funding on the federal level, if there's not enforcement agencies, then discrimination can happen with no repercussions for bad actors, you know? And so, we're seeing that people do feel more emboldened to discriminate, illegally discriminate, but we also see a continuous steady call log to our office. So, I would say it's more that the potential--the increased potential--of our funding being cut, the new fiscal year '27 administration's budget came out and it was once again trying to zero out all the funding from the federal government for nonprofits like mine.

David Fair: Our Washtenaw United conversation with Kristen Cuhran continues on 89.1 WEMU. She is Executive Director of the Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid Michigan. Particularly, when it comes to the immigrants in our community, is housing discrimination being underreported? Is it happening more often than we understand and more often there's being called into your office?

Kristen Cuhran: Yes on all of those questions. We know that folks are worried about calling our office. Every intake we do is confidential, but they're not as much as they should be. We know that this type of discrimination is happening on a greater frequency, but folks, I believe, are scared to reach out to anybody that looks like the government, which we are not, but we do enforce these government laws.

David Fair: So much of opportunity is based on zip code. We know that Washtenaw

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Discrimination knows no borders, but through redlining of our communities and that economic and racial separation, do you see patterns as to where housing discrimination is more likely?

Kristen Cuhran: Absolutely! The majority of our complaints, like I said, are coming from Washtenaw County, but a large portion in Ypsilanti. And that's because we have a higher number of rental properties, and that's a whole other issue as to, of course, why is there not more affordable housing in Ann Arbor proper. But the larger point is that we have so many more people of color and low-income folks concentrated in Ypsilanti, so we get a lot more complaints from that area.

David Fair: Who's more likely to commit discrimination: smaller individual landlords in these rental properties or the major property development companies?

Kristen Cuhran: That's a great question! And I would say it's fairly even because we have the smaller groups who might be saying, "I don't want children here" or "I can't accommodate a person with a disability," or "I don't want any just single mothers here." We have that, but then the larger complex works, when we resolve the case, especially with a larger housing provider, we are able to change the larger housing landscape. So, we've been able to ask for internal policy changes from a larger complex to say, "Okay, you have to have this in your own internal staff policy that you're going to allow for reasonable accommodations for a person with a disability, or you are going to let children live on every floor in a complex or you can't decide where folks get to live."

David Fair: Once again, this is 89.1 WEMU's Washtenaw United. And today, we're talking with Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid Michigan Executive Director, Kristen Cuhran. Kristen, what percentage of these cases you take on result in mediated settlements and how many end in litigation?

Kristen Cuhran: The amount of complaints that actually go to litigation is rather small. We do as much as we can to work and resolve a complaint before it goes to litigation. We do a ton majority of work right now on physical and mental disabilities, and many of those are resolved through the advocacy of the staff at the Fair Housing Center. And we're able to get those accommodations and modifications met before proceeding into litigation.

David Fair: In order to best understand what someone else is going through, it is sometimes of great value to have had some personal experience in that particular arena. Has housing discrimination touched you and or your family?

Kristen Cuhran: Yes. And back many years ago, I was looking for housing with my then-partner, and we were told the unit was available. We were told we were able that they wanted us to live there. And then, when they met us and we were a same-sex couple, we immediately were told, "Oh, I forgot. My daughter just told me they rented the unit," which we knew that that wasn't true.

David Fair: Did it inform how you approached your job after?

Kristen Cuhran: Yeah, I would say it did. Absolutely!

David Fair: The Fair Housing Center has been working in our community for 34 or so years, and housing discrimination remains both that very personal issue, as well as a societal issue. Where do we go from here?

Kristen Cuhran: Great question! I always say I'm trying to work myself out of a job. I would love to say we've as a society worked to a place where the Fair Housing Center isn't needed. But unfortunately, complaints continue to come into our office. They're getting more complex, and more resources are needed to continue to fund this. I should mention April is Fair Housing Month, so we're doing a Fair Housing Month campaign right now to just try to raise funds to help folks who call our office, but also to provide the education needed, so people understand that we are out here, that we can help with any complaints of housing discrimination or harassment. We just keep trying to enforce these laws. We have these great tools: the Fair Housing Act, the Michigan Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act, the Person with Disabilities Civil Rights Act, and, again, individual city ordinances. And those are great tools. We just need to continue to use them. So, I think just an increased awareness of that the Fair Housing Center exists and that we're here to help will continue to change our society towards the better--toward a society free from housing discrimination.

David Fair: Well, as odd as it may sound, I hope you are out of work sooner rather than later.

David Fair: Thank you so much for the time and conversation, Kristen! Much appreciated!

Kristen Cuhran: Thank you, David! Thanks again for having me!

David Fair: That is Kristen Cuhran. She is Executive Director of the Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid Michigan and has been our guest on Washtenaw United. For more information on the work of the Fair Housing Center and for more information on how to contact the center if you're in need of assistance, go to our website at WEMU.org. We'll get you linked everywhere you need to go. Washtenaw United is produced in partnership with the United Way for Southeast Michigan, and you hear it every Monday. I'm David Fair, and this is your community NPR station, 89.1 WEMU Ypsilanti.

WEMU has partnered with the [United Way for Southeastern Michigan](#) to explore the people, organizations, and institutions creating opportunity and equity in our area. And, as part of this ongoing series, you'll also hear from the people benefiting and growing from the investments being made in the areas of our community where there are gaps in available services. It is a community voice. It is 'Washtenaw United.'

