

The Fight for Fair Housing

An Interview with Andres Portela by Mireya Escamilla and Kathy Budway

Andres Portela (right) is the Education, Outreach and Media Coordinator of the Southwest Fair Housing Council (SWFHC) in Tucson, Arizona. SWFHC is a non-profit organization that works to uphold the Fair Housing Act (FHA). The FHA is a federal law that makes it illegal to discriminate against people in any housing transaction based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, and familial status.



How did you get interested in fair housing?

When I was a student at the University of Arizona, my girlfriend, who is now my wife, and I experienced housing discrimination. We went to a few different apartment complexes and we were told, "Because you are not married, we can't rent to

you." At the time, we accepted it. We didn't realize that the law made it illegal to discriminate based on marital status. We were like most people. We didn't know our rights!

Describe your work at SWFHC.

Now I work with members of the community who may be experiencing housing discrimination. We do workshops at churches and schools about housing rights. If you try to get an apartment, and you are denied because you have children or a disability (or because you're not married!),

that is illegal. Also, you should not be treated differently based on your race, sex, or religion. If you are, you can come and talk to us, and we will support your case.

What are some of the issues that keep people from access to fair and affordable housing?

The FHA makes housing discrimination illegal, but that doesn't guarantee you can afford the housing that's available. Let's talk about Section 8, for example. We have an eviction crisis in Tucson. There were approximately 13,000 evictions last year. The housing authority in Tucson issues about 5000 vouchers for Section 8. But there are only about 2000 housing units that will accept vouchers! And there is a 7-8 month waiting list to even get the voucher.

What do people do in the meantime?

In the meantime, there is very little protection for them because:

- Arizona does not mandate that housing providers take Section 8 vouchers.
- We have the Arizona Landlord Tenant Act, but it is very favorable to landlords. For example, there is no time frame for how quickly the

How the Census Connects to Equity

The census helps advocates fight for equity. It reveals where the public and private sector need to invest in communities so that there are adequate jobs, schools, and clinics. To achieve equity in society, we need all our communities to have access to these basic resources, so that there is a level playing field.



Find additional classroom and program materials about the census at nelrc.org/stand-up-and-be-counted.



The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created this Fair Housing Door Exhibit to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Fair Housing Act (April 1968). Photo from Wikimedia Commons. Discuss what you see in the photo. What is the symbolism of putting the words on doors?

landlords should make repairs. So tenants live with mold and no access to heat or hot water.

- There is no agency that is even in charge of enforcing the Arizona Landlord Tenant Act.

Fortunately, we have non-profit organizations like Step Up to Justice, which has pro-bono lawyers that help tenants trying to address these local housing violations.

So, what can be done?

If I were in charge, I would create an office of equity in every city in this country, like they have in San Antonio and Austin. If an Office of Equity sees that the Landlord Tenant Act is not being implemented, they can put pressure on city officials to do something. We also need emergency rental assistance with the focus on keeping tenants in place to curb our eviction crisis. Most people in Arizona are about a paycheck away from getting evicted. If they lose their job or run into unplanned expense, like a hospital bill, they won't be able to make rent.

What stories of discrimination do you hear about at SWFHC?

In the past we saw more explicit bias due to race, etc. But today, we see what we call disparate impact. For example, Arizona has a huge prison population. And when we look at who is being incarcerated, it is mostly people of color, and people are often denied housing on that basis. We also see this with people in domestic violence situations. Let's say I call the cops because my spouse is beat-

ing me. Well, the Arizona nuisance ordinance says, if the cops are called to the property more than four times in a month, you can be evicted.

What advice do you have for readers?

It is our responsibility to join with others to create communities that are inclusive and affordable for everyone. One way to do this is to work with the grassroots organizations that are fighting for fair housing. Another strategy is to vote for legislators who will advocate for us. Also, you should participate in the census, so we make sure our communities are counted. If we don't vote and don't participate in the census, then we will keep getting what we are getting; and what we are getting is not enough. We need to understand the power of our vote and the power of sending back our census forms!

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What is the problem? What does SWFHC do about it?
2. Read the articles on pp. 41-45. What are some strategies people use to fight for fair housing?



Mireya Escamilla and Kathy Budway are from Pima College Adult Basic Education (PCC).