Realtor, homeowner accused of racial bias

Complaint says black woman was denied chance to buy house

By GINA BARTON
gbarton@journalsentinel.com

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U.S. Attorney Steven M. Biskupic has filed a federal civil rights complaint against a Realtor at Re/MAX Realty 100 and a Milwaukee homeowner, alleging that they refused to consider selling a home to a Milwaukee Public Schools principal because she is black.

According to the complaint, filed Thursday, and HUD charge:

Tami Doss, a Milwaukee Public Schools principal and mother of two college-age sons, was looking to move out of her apartment and into a house. Because of her job, Doss is required to live in the city of Milwaukee. Doss' Realtor, Margaret Silkey, was on the lookout for a four-bedroom home for her client when she received a call from a homeowner about a possible listing.

Silkey conducted a market analysis of the home, in the 9000 block of W. Mount Vernon Ave., near Blue Mound Road. The owner of the home, Edith Halvorsen, decided to list it with another agent, but Silkey wanted Doss to see it anyway. Silkey called Halvorsen and said she had a prospective buyer. Halvorsen asked if the prospective buyer was black and explained that her sister had sold to a black family, which made the neighbors angry. Silkey told Halvorsen it was illegal to answer that question or to exclude a buyer because of race.
Silkey still wanted Doss to see the property. Silkey called the Multiple Listing Service to find out when the house would be put up for sale and which Realtor would be selling it. In the course of the conversation, Silkey said she wanted the listing agent, Phyllis Hasenstab, to be made aware of Halvorsen's comments.

After that, Hasenstab, of Re/MAX Realty 100 in Hales Corners, refused to return Silkey's phone calls and noted on the listing that Silkey was not allowed to show the house to any of her clients. Such exclusions are allowed if they are based on an agent's behavior. Exclusions may not be based on the race of the Realtor or the client.

According to Silkey, Hasenstab told her she had been excluded because "you know what you did with the MLS." Hasenstab told HUD investigators Silkey had been excluded because she was "pestering" the homeowner to see the house before it had been officially listed for sale.

The house, which was listed for $189,900, ultimately was sold to a white man.

Doss was "offended, hurt and shocked," by the situation and "felt sadness that people still feel this way," according to the HUD complaint. She stopped looking for a house for a while and was still living in an apartment when the HUD complaint was filed at the end of September.

Silkey, who had been in the real estate business for more than 20 years, left before she was ready to retire because of the incident. She felt that her reputation had been damaged, according to the HUD complaint.

Attorney David Carlson, who represents Halvorson, declined to comment. Hasenstab did not return a telephone call. Attorney James McAlister, who represents Hasenstab and Re/MAX, was on vacation and could not be reached, according to a receptionist in his office.

The government is seeking an injunction to stop the defendants from discriminating on the basis of race as well as financial damages for both Doss and Silkey.