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Conference focuses on housing bias

By Michael Gonzalez Post-Tribune correspondent April 29, 2011 10:21PM

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GARY — The Indiana Civil Rights Commission brought its message to Northwest Indiana in a daylong conference Friday that drew about 200 community members, landlords and tenants, students and school teachers.

The Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority cosponsored the event.

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Called "Navigating the Changing Landscape in Housing, Education and Employment," the conference at the Genesis Convention Center featured workshops on topics including updates in employment and civil rights law, reaching at-risk student populations and a panel on the title of the event.

"We need to be out in every corner of the state, which means we'll be back in Northwest Indiana," said ICRC Executive Director Jamal Smith, adding similar events have been held in three other Indiana cities. "Ideally, what we'll do is continually push our message and be present."

That message is the ICRC is a state agency and resource dedicated to handling Hoosiers' claims of discrimination in housing, employment, education and alleged civil rights abuses, said Brad Meadows, spokesman for the agency.

April is national Fair Housing Month, he said, but, statewide, less than one percent of housing discrimination cases are ever reported, making the ICRC's outreach even more important, he said.

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The goal of the conference was to get groups together, talking about issues that are important to them related to education, housing and employment and how they can help each other, Smith said.

"The idea is to bring everyone to the table and bridge these gaps between agencies that can work together," he added.

The conference worked to get people talking about real issues and real ways to work together, not just eat and congratulate each other for showing up, said Jena' Bellezza, marketing director for the Indiana Parenting Institute, a four-year-old non-profit corporation in Gary.

"Everybody started to get on the same page about what needs to be done in the area, especially with education," she said. Nobody sat up and issued their own personal agendas, and they took solid steps to address issues together."

For Sylvia Planer, of the Hammond Hispanic Community Committee, one step is bringing cultural awareness to Hammond teachers, administrators, parents and the larger community.

"The school administration and the teachers are not in synch, not engaged, with their community," Planer said. "It really hit right on the button that we need to get more involved with the school district and say, 'Hey, we're here and we want to be part of your school district'."

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