

## Vel Phillips and the Struggle for Fair Housing

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### Goals

Students watch a four-minute video of the Milwaukee Common Council postponing action on Alderwoman Vel Phillips's proposed fair housing ordinance, analyze key provisions of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and debate the conflict between property rights and civil rights.

### Central Questions

What necessitated the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968? Why were some people opposed to the act? What happened to African Americans in inner cities after this law was passed? Did passing the act end segregation?

### Background Information

Until the 1960s, discriminatory laws forced nearly all African Americans in Milwaukee to live in a single neighborhood just north and northwest of downtown. Ninety percent of Milwaukee subdivisions had been planned out with regulations prohibiting the sale of property to people of color; and informal agreements among realtors, lenders, and landlords reinforced those restrictions. This was not illegal until 1968; many, if not most, US cities were similarly segregated.

Black residents who tried to move out of the central city were met by landlords who refused to rent to them or banks that wouldn't give mortgages. When they tried to rent vacant apartments, the landlords told them that the spaces had suddenly been rented to others, or that prices and rents were much higher than had been publicly advertised.

In 1962, Alderwoman Vel Phillips introduced to the Milwaukee Common Council the first ordinance intended to reverse this sort of discrimination. The council voted to defeat it 18-1, her vote being the only one in favor. The same vote reoccurred three more times over the next six years. Finally, in 1967-68, Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council picketed the homes of alders and marched for 200 consecutive nights to demand a fair housing law. In April 1968, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the US Congress passed a national fair housing law. On April 30, 1968, the Milwaukee Common Council followed with its own ordinance.

As neighborhoods opened up to African Americans, thousands of white residents left the city: in 1960, Milwaukee had 668,000 white residents, but in 2000, it had only 298,000. Although segregation has been illegal in housing, schools, employment, and other areas of US life for nearly half a century, Milwaukee remains one of the most segregated cities in the nation today.

### Documents Used in This Lesson:

1. News film clip of a Milwaukee Common Council meeting where Alderwoman Vel Phillips urges action on a fair housing ordinance, September 19, 1967.  
<http://wihist.org/1yqyrmB>
2. Excerpt from the Fair Housing law, Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.  
<http://wihist.org/1xO1hLW>

Document 1: News film clip of a Milwaukee Common Council meeting, September 19, 1967.  
<http://wihist.org/1yqyrmB>

This four-minute video clip shows what Milwaukee Common Council meetings were like at the height of the fair housing effort in 1967. Because the film is unedited raw footage, it skips around a little.



In the first minute, Alderwoman Vel Phillips requests that the Milwaukee Common Council take action on her proposed ordinance to guarantee fair housing to the city's residents. Father James Groppi and a number of NAACP Youth Council Commandos rise to applaud when she finishes.

At 1:25, Alderman Robert Dwyer responds by proposing that her ordinance be left to a committee. He objects to what he terms her "veiled threat" and questions the motives of the demonstrators.

At 3:25, Phillips summarizes the national importance of the Milwaukee fair housing struggle and urges that the ordinance not be held up in the city attorney's office "until things simmer down, because things are not going to simmer down."

## Questions

Document 1: News film clip of a Milwaukee Common Council meeting, September 19, 1967.

1. The opening speaker is Alderwoman Vel Phillips. What is her main point? How would you describe her demeanor and behavior toward the other council members she's addressing?
2. At 1:25, Alderman Robert Dwyer replies to Phillips. What are his main points? How would you describe his demeanor and behavior toward Phillips?
3. Phillips was the only woman and the only African American on the Common Council. Imagine that you are in her position. Smartphones didn't exist back then, but imagine they did and compose three Tweets or text messages during the meeting about what is happening. The audience who will read them includes the Commandos who stand and clap and other supporters.
4. What surprised you in this video? What did you realize or learn for the first time when watching it?

Document 2: excerpt from the Fair Housing law (Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968).  
<http://wihist.org/1xO1hLW>

In April 1968, six months after the events depicted in the video, the US government passed a law prohibiting discrimination in housing. The Milwaukee Common Council followed suit.

**Sec. 804. [42 U.S.C. 3604] Discrimination in sale or rental of housing and other prohibited practices**

As made applicable by section 803 of this title and except as exempted by sections 803(b) and 807 of this title, it shall be unlawful--

(a) To refuse to sell or rent after the making of a bona fide offer, or to refuse to negotiate for the sale or rental of, or otherwise make unavailable or deny, a dwelling to any person because of race, color, religion, sex, familial status, or national origin.

(b) To discriminate against any person in the terms, conditions, or privileges of sale or rental of a dwelling, or in the provision of services or facilities in connection therewith, because of race, color, religion, sex, familial status, or national origin.

(c) To make, print, or publish, or cause to be made, printed, or published any notice, statement, or advertisement, with respect to the sale or rental of a dwelling that indicates any preference, limitation, or discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, or national origin, or an intention to make any such preference, limitation, or discrimination.

(d) To represent to any person because of race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, or national origin that any dwelling is not available for inspection, sale, or rental when such dwelling is in fact so available.

(e) For profit, to induce or attempt to induce any person to sell or rent any dwelling by representations regarding the entry or prospective entry into the neighborhood of a person or persons of a particular race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, or national origin.

## Questions

Document 2: excerpt from the Fair Housing law (Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968).

With a partner, investigate these questions, come up with an answer that you both agree upon, and be ready to discuss them with the class.

1. What's the most important phrase in the opening four lines?
2. Choose two of the sections (a through e) and rewrite them in simpler, shorter ways that somebody younger than you could understand.
3. Debate with your partner: Should people be able to live wherever they want, if they can afford it? Why? Should landlords be able to reject anybody they want, for any reason they want? Why? Do these two ideas conflict? How could you resolve any conflict that you see?
4. Think about your school, your neighborhood, and your community. Do you see people from lots of different racial and ethnic backgrounds? List three good things about living in a racially diverse community. List three hard things about living in a diverse community.