

FHEO Table Talks Series: Advancing Fair Housing and Racial Equity: Why it Matters

Host: **DeAndra J. Cullen**, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Policy, Legislative Initiatives, and Outreach

Speaker: **Demetria McCain**, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Welcome back to season two of the FHEO table talk series. I am your host, DeAndra J. Cullen. Last season, we talked to community advocates, housing experts, physicians, social scientists, and researchers about topics ranging from the racial wealth divide, health disparities, returning citizens, and the challenges they experience, as well as the homeownership gap. We are listening to those trusted voices in the communities we at HUD serve every day. We aren't just making policy decisions for people. Instead, this administration is clear: we will make policy decisions with people. We want to hear from you. People with lived experiences. Today, I have the pleasure of having a conversation with one of those leaders who truly understands this charge. I am thrilled, absolutely thrilled, to sit here today and talk to FHEO's very first, very first, principal deputy assistant secretary, Demetria McCain. Demetria, welcome to FHEO!

**Demetria McCain:** I am just incredibly excited to be here and to be here in person with you!

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Absolutely. Absolutely. We've had that whole social distancing and the impact from COVID.

**Demetria McCain:** As long as we stay away from each other.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Absolutely. I want to you know personally, it is an honor to host this season's season premiere episode with you as our first guest of season two.

**Demetria McCain:** Well, thank you, thank you very much.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Thank you for being here.

**Demetria McCain:** Thank you.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** You know, I did some research before I sat down with you today. And so I want to share with you a little bit of what I've learned. I learned that you were adjunct professor at Hoffman state, a HBCU, a former president of the inclusive communities project. And you served as a staff attorney at the neighborhood legal services program. How did I do?

**Demetria McCain:** That's all true. I can't deny any that.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Wonderful. I know there's so much more but for the interest of time we're going go ahead and get started. I also know, and I want to emphasize this, you are no stranger to fair housing and public policy. This is what your career has been founded on. I anticipate, and I know this will be a lively discussion between the two of us today. I look forward to hearing your perspective on racial equity, housing equity, and underserved communities. That's really going to be important for this conversation. Let's jump right on in.

And sticking with a traditional FHEO table talk tradition, I want to start our conversation with an ice break breaker. So bear with me here. Demetria, if you were to write your own story in a book, what would be the title of your autobiography, and why?

**Demetria McCain:** Where do you come up with these!

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Hey!

**Demetria McCain:** An autobiography. So I think it would be probably a children's book. A children's book, with a title of Fuzzy Head Girls Can.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Fuzzy Head Girls Can.

**Demetria McCain:** Fuzzy Head Girls Can. That's what it would be. I really think that children's books are important. It's a genre that we don't really pay that much attention to. But when you are talking about inspiring young people to do things, that's where it starts.

I mean, I remember books from my childhood that still resonate with me, and you know, I was fortunate that most of my life growing up, people really said I can. You can, you can. No matter what it is. With you -- but then I got older and I was around people who let's say were from other communities who challenged me when I asked them questions about maybe their careers that might interest me. I remember very clearly, I was a member of a union, and I had an opportunity at a meeting to meet the general counsel, the lawyer, for that union, and I kind of was interested in the work he did. This was before I went to law school. I was like how did you get into the position, how did you do this and he was very condescending, and he was like "hard work, just very hard work" as if it was something I wasn't capable of. So yeah, that's what I would say, fuzzy head girls can.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Fuzzy head girls can. Wow. Now that's insightful! I appreciate that. You've given us a sneak peek on your best seller, because I can already see that, you know, as a mother of a young child, I can see her reading that, fuzzy head girl. I love it.

**Demetria McCain:** You got the -- after this!

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Right. So thank you for sharing that with us. Let's dive into our topics today if you don't mind.

**Demetria McCain:** Let's do it.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Demetria, how has your experiencing in advocating for housing equity for underserved people and in underserved communities prepared you to serve as FHEO's principal deputy assistant secretary?

**Demetria McCain:** Well, my last position, 5 which was a 15-year stint at my previous employer, was I think uniquely prepared me, I'd have to say, out of all my experiences. I say that because not only was I working on fair housing policy, but the organization worked on fair housing policy while simultaneously delivering direct services to people who actually are consumers or customers, you might say, of some of HUD's programs, particularly the housing choice voucher program, because they had a housing mobility program where we actually counseled direct recipients of housing choice vouchers who happened to be people who wanted to move outside of the usual places that they've been steered to, the high poverty places that have been formerly historically red lined, so I was able to work on policy stuff, kind of when necessary, we were kind of in the litigation space as organizational plaintiffs who were trying to push for enforcement of fair housing, as well as hearing the lived experiencing for myself, not just sitting in an ivory tower, reading research papers.

So I think that really kind of helped position me, as well as working and talking and hearing some of the struggles that some developers have who are trying to build in those places where our clients wanted to move, and then obviously sitting in city council meetings and those 6 kind of spaces and going to state houses and trying to push for fair housing policy. So I kind of had an opportunity to see all parts of it, so to say.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Gotcha. I've heard you once say this: impact that we -- impact policy to impact lives. Heard you say that. It's a heavy statement. I think it's appropriate for the times that we are facing right now. How do you believe your role as the principal deputy assistant secretary can impact the development of housing policy that positively impacts our country's underserved populations?

**Demetria McCain:** Well, I think what I just told you about my experience comes with me. When I come into the room, I come with that experience. I come with the experiences of, quite honestly, being an African American person in America. And I bring all of that with me, and I also bring the experiences of people whom I've known who have been hurt by, you know, fair housing discrimination with me. And while they may not directly be at the table all the time, I try to bring those voices with me to the table. And hopefully, at that table, we can get some work done that can improve upon where we are right now in this country, and in turn impacting their lives.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Awesome. Awesome. We talked about your career in fair housing, as you talked about. And I want to shift a little bit on the priority of this administration in addressing racial disparities in the housing market. Why do you think advancing racial equity in housing is more important now than ever?

**Demetria McCain:** We have an opportunity right now. So, to be honest, it's always been important. But now is the time that I think we have an opportunity like we haven't before. We have a lot of things going on at one time, right? We've always had a housing crisis, in recent years that I know of, we've had some people who haven't always spoken up, speak up, about discrimination in those kind of things, both publicly and privately, and it's on the mind of people.

Obviously, we're in a post-George Floyd kind of posture right now. And so I think the country is now -- has been enlivened. And is focusing on issues as it relates to this. And so because of that, if we don't do something now, I'm not sure when a better opportunity would come about that we can address these issues. I think now is the time.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Now is the time. Absolutely. I appreciate your perspective on that. We have some work to do, as you've mentioned, and I know for a fact that I'm very hopeful that we are moving in the right direction, because we are listening to voices, and I think that's a great thing for us. I want to talk a little bit now about housing barriers. Barriers to housing. What do you see as the barriers to eliminating racial bias and other forms of discrimination in the home buying and rental markets, that process?

**Demetria McCain:** Well, the first step is people have to understand that people are people. And they shouldn't, you know, expect to treat people differently because of whatever protected class member they happen to be a member of, religion, you know, race, ethnicity, national origin, all of those protected classes, disability.

But that's a matter of changing hearts and minds. But while a certain group of people work on changing hearts and minds, we've got to work on changing policy and to be quite honest with you, you know, this

administration issued an executive order specifically focusing on racial equity, right, and days later -- that was in January, January 20th, and days later, January 26, President Biden wrote a letter to the secretary of HUD, right, saying that we've got to deal with these issues of racial equity, but not just new ones.

We've got to deal with some 9 of the systemic stuff that happened years ago. And undo some of those bad things. Because they have been going on, and they've created legacies. Legacies of people kind of not building wealth, et cetera, et cetera, particularly in the homeownership piece. Which is why the administration, and particularly HUD, is really excited about the work that the pave group is doing. The pave group is really kind of bringing together practitioners, people with lived experiences, policy folks, around this issue of homeownership as it relates to particularly people of color and looking at issues of appraisals, because there's a difference between how the appraisals have been taking place of homes in neighborhoods of color versus white, non-Hispanic neighborhoods. And so we've got to undo some of that systemic stuff. Right, it's not just about looking at today's discrimination. What has been in our systems that have caused the disparities that we see today.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Yeah, wow. Absolutely.

**Demetria McCain:** That was a long response to your question.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** No, but it was needed. It was necessary. And I thank you for bringing 10 that all together. Because it is important. It is a conversation. It's a conversation starter that we are having. So this is great information that you are sharing with us. How can the federal government lift barriers that restrict housing and neighborhood choice?

**Demetria McCain:** Well, we've got to look at things internally and externally. Honestly. Neighborhood choice is huge. Neighborhood choice comes from issues of exclusion, where we have places and people who don't want other people who don't look like them in their neighborhoods, talking about issues related to zoning and things like that, that can get kind of technical, but at the end of the day, it has the same effect of saying no, don't come here. Right? So that is huge, because if somebody wants to choose to live in a certain area, who's to say that a different group of people should say they can't. Right? So that's what we are talking about on the exclusionary piece of it.

Also on the issue of people wanting to not be displaced from where they are, where they've lived for a while, but there are certain, like, pressures, industry pressures, public governmental pressures, taking place that push them out and displace them from 11 where they have been, where they have really been stewards, you might say, of their neighborhoods, because they have chosen to stay there, those are other issues we've got to look at. And again, I think we've got to look at this from a policy perspective. Where I sit is from the federal perspective. But there are other levels of government that also I think play a part in some of this work, including state and local government, I would say.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Having us all kind of work together.

**Demetria McCain:** Absolutely.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Know that there's an issue we need to address and coming together to find them.

**Demetria McCain:** With the fulcrum being the fair housing act, right?

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** The guiding piece of this. It's a heavy lift, but a goal worth working to achieve.

**Demetria McCain:** Absolutely.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Would you agree?

**Demetria McCain:** Absolutely.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Now I want to talk a little about the disparities in homeownership. You know, we know that there are housing disparities that you've touched on quite a bit. What I would like to do is closing the homeownership gap, the wealth gap, is a major, major priority of this administration. What actions is FHEO taking or planning to take to ensure that every person in this country that lives in this country has access to housing and the ability to create 12 wealth through homeownership? What are your thoughts?

**Demetria McCain:** Well, I think something that we are looking at that's important is to focus on the issues of credit. Right? There are different factors, obviously, that go into determinations of whether somebody is credit worthy, and to be quite honest, if you trace some of those determinations and factors you may find that there are disparities even in those factors, right, or along that line, that spectrum of things that come up regarding creditworthiness.

You find that people who are members of protected classes like based on race and color tend to have credit that doesn't quite get them over the hump, to be able to, you know, get a mortgage and buy a home. And so we've got to look at all aspects of that link in the chain towards homeownership.

Obviously, people have been doing homeownership workshops and education forever. We've got to keep doing that. We shouldn't stop doing that. But when we look at things like, you know, special purpose credit, things like that, those things are legitimate tools that we can consider using and that the industry can consider using to make sure that people who have been locked out are able to come into the homeownership world. And as I mentioned earlier, the issues of appraisals, that's also a piece of it as well.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** So I believe you agree that this is a multi-prong approach to a multi-prong problem.

**Demetria McCain:** Absolutely. If we only use one tool, we wouldn't really get very far.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Okay. Gotcha. We know that the problem will not be corrected overnight. And the approach will take time for us to realize what really needs it take place. But for the problem to be solved, again, we must all work together is what you are saying.

**Demetria McCain:** Absolutely. I mean, when I say we, I don't mean simply government. It includes the private industry, it includes all kinds of stakeholders.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Now I want to talk about COVID-19. COVID-19 has affected this country, our nation, the globe, in ways that we have never imagined before. The pandemic exposed the disparities in America's housing and health care systems, particularly among people of color and in low-income communities. We know that housing is a social determinant of health. How can HUD support health equity in housing?

**Demetria McCain:** Well, I think we've got to come together as partners, federal government agencies 14 have to come together as partners. The secretary of HUD, HUD Fudge, along with the secretary of health and human services, have come together and issued kind of a joint statement in doing joint work as it relates to covid, making sure that neighborhoods that are usually underserved and left out are getting the resources they need as it relates to covid, because as you mentioned, health, housing, they go together, right?

And so it's about bringing together partnerships, you know, among all the agencies in federal government who have equities in some of these issues. And you know, for HUD its nothing new. HUD has always run its healthy homes program, so that's important, but now because as you mentioned, the disparities that we are seeing have been heightened because of covid, I think that work with interagency, you know, practices, and those kinds of things, have got to continue. Also, even on the environmental side, you know, agencies are working together to deal with environmental types of issues that relate to housing and health.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Absolutely. We are definitely – I have a good question for you on that one, too. I definitely want to hear your perspective on environmental justice. I can't wait to get to those 15 parts of our conversation. Thank you for reaffirming the commitment to addressing the disparities of our communities. And with specific regard to housing and health care, they are interconnected, and the data shows that, as you've talked about.

HUD recently published an interim final rule to restore definitions and proper certification of the fair housing act's affirmatively furthering fair housing requirement. Why was this such an important step or action for this administration or for HUD to take at this time?

**Demetria McCain:** Sure. Well, the restoration of the definitions and ensuring that the certification piece was still there really traces back to the original statute. It's a mouthful, affirmatively furthering fair housing is a requirement under the 1968 fair housing act that grantees of HUD funding not only refrain from discriminating but that they take specific actions to try to open up housing, right to, affirmatively do something about an issue, right, that being fair housing.

And so we really had gotten away in the last few years from the actual definitions that tie to that statutory requirement. So this is just kind of bringing us back to the real definitions and what is the original intent, really, of the act, and why we have this provision. 16 because the provision never went away. The provision is there statutorily. And so we've got to have our regulations match the statute.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Absolutely. You've been a soldier on the ground for a number of years. We can't deny the fact that you have an extensive background in community engagement, volunteering, your work with nonprofit organizations, focused on fair housing issues and public policy. I think you and I are definitely -- I don't think, I know you and I are very like-minded in this area. How do you see HUD partnering with these non-profit and grass roots organizations to advance equity in housing as it relates to AFFH?

**Demetria McCain:** Wonderful. I appreciate the question. We have actually -- we are in the midst of and finishing up a round of stakeholder meetings as it relates to AFFH. Because we want to hear as we go forward, trying to improve our AFFH rule, hear what folks are saying, hear what is being done and said around the country, get ideas from other folks, because I mean, if you stay just with the ideas of we

have a wonderful staff at HUD, but if you just simply stay with 17 the ideas and in the heads of people who are on staff at HUD, that doesn't really necessarily get to you where you need to be. Right.

So there are other brilliant, smart people in the world besides people that work for HUD, right, so that's what that's about. It's about making sure that we are able to hear from grassroots folks, nonprofit folks, equal rights members, community partners, even state and local people, staff members and those folks in the industry that represents them, we want to hear from a variety of people and really Secretary Fudge has made it clear that it's important for us to hear from a variety of people. And so that's what we are doing through this process, and we are going to take those comments very seriously. Obviously it's going to be a balancing act because not all the voices we hear are saying the same thing, but in keeping with the purpose of the affirmatively furthering fair housing provision, we are going to do our best to make sure that we are responsive to what we hear on the ground.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Absolutely. I always borrow your phrase when you say lived experiences, I like that, because --

**Demetria McCain:** It's not my phrase!

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** But a phrase that I've heard you adopt, and something that you believe in.

**Demetria McCain:** Absolutely. When I -- in my previous position, not only did I work and hear directly from housing choice voucher holders but worked with neighborhood groups in communities of color who had been harmed and impacted by environmental injustice in their back yard, who had been harmed by a threat with displacement from types of development and what have you taking place around them. So those people have value, and their voices matter. You know, just because somebody doesn't have a college degree or graduate degree doesn't mean they don't know what has happened to them, what is happening to them, and that they need something fixed.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Yeah. They have insight.

**Demetria McCain:** Exactly.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** That's meaningful. How does the affirmatively furthering fair housing provision of the fair housing act help realize the promise of fair housing?

**Demetria McCain:** well, if we do it right, all of those folks that I mentioned earlier when I was speaking, HUD grantees, being state and local folks, and everybody involved, would all be working towards the same goal, which was the goal written in the statute in the fair housing act to affirmatively further fair housing which means to open up for fair housing.

And the fair housing act, and know you've talked about this on previous table talks, that 19 was passed right after the assassination of Martin Luther King who had been fighting for fair housing, fighting for open housing. And because we know that the problem still exists, that law has not been repealed. So that's what we need to all come together and work towards and if done right, we are all working towards that goal.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** I like to hear that. And you mentioned previous table talk, so I -- I like the fact that I can ask this question of you. We had a special health care episode of our FHEO table talks. I know you've seen them, so you are probably familiar with what I'm talking about. Dr. Edward miller

emphasized that in many cases, your zip code determines your access to health care. We are also seeing that it can also impact environmental quality of housing. How can HUD develop housing policy to focus on environmental justice? I told you I was going to get to this question, so here it is: how can we develop policy that focuses on environmental justice in house something.

**Demetria McCain:** Well, this is not a question just for the fair housing office. This is a question for all of HUD. I mean, HUD has several different programs. So I kind of mentioned earlier that there's some topics that are being 20 addressed at the interagency level, the justice 40 effort is one of those type of topics being addressed on the interagency level.

You used the word environmental, so obviously, our EPA is involved, right, our other health agencies are involved. HUD is involved. And so as we are coming together right now, the idea is to think about how each of our programs within HUD can do better. Right? We've got to do better. In that sense. Because there are issues that relate to zoning, that one might not think, well, is that really a fair housing issue?

Well, if zoning has something to do with housing and zoning has something to do with where maybe a toxic activity takes place and they are near each other, next door to each other, around the corner from each other and that keeps happening in neighborhoods of color, that is probably an issue, right? But it's more than just the fair housing office of HUD that should be involved, and is involved in those discussions.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Yeah, because there's healthy homes, you know, when we talk about air pollution, you've got the lead-based paint issue that I know we talk and focus on and water quality. We saw the big issue that happened in Michigan just 21 with the quality of water. So I appreciate that. And that's why you obviously have such a wealth of knowledge and expertise in all of these areas that you could already foresee the questions that I was going to ask you.

**Demetria McCain:** But let's think about it, though, because you talked about choice earlier. So if somebody wants to choose where to live and perhaps they don't want to live where they grew up, but the only choice they have is to live next to some type of environmental hazard, then we are already back to this issue of are we affirmatively furthering fair housing, are we making sure that there are housing options -- that their housing options are real, are we forcing them to live in areas they may not want to live in.

Some people want to, and we need to make sure that those are safe areas and cleaned you said, right? And I'm not speaking as EPA. But the housing choice piece also comes in when we are thinking about that environmental piece as well.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Absolutely. So it's not just about finding that affordable housing but we want to find safe housing.

**Demetria McCain:** Right, right.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** We want people to live in environments where their families can thrive.

**Demetria McCain:** Exactly.

**Demetria McCain:** And make current neighborhoods safer.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** Absolutely.



**Demetria McCain:** Both.

**DeAndra J. Cullen:** This has been an honest and fulfilling conversation, full of insight and perspective. We thank you for taking time to share your lived experiences, while also discussing the disparities in homeownership, and HUD's commitment to ensuring that this country realizes the full promise of fair housing for all.

I look forward to working with you, Demetria.