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The Hour

NEWS HOTLINE 354-1062

Commission focuses on handicap access for multifamily dwellings

NORWALK

By **ROBERT KOCH**

Hour Staff Writer

Wheelchairs don't fit through narrow doorways and thermostats placed higher than four feet above the floor are sometimes out of reach of handicapped persons. Those are facts.

On Friday, the Norwalk Fair Housing Advisory Commission drove home those and other points to developers, architects, attorneys and government officials at City Hall during a luncheon seminar titled "Access Required: Federal Requirements for Design and Construction of New Multifamily Housing."

"One of the biggest problems we've seen ... is the fact that people aren't even aware of what the requirements are," said Sara K. Pratt, a fair-housing trainer and former director of enforcement for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Fair Housing & Equal Opportunity in Washington, D.C. "If you violate the law, you are in violation of the federal civil rights law — one or more. And you may have a lawsuit brought against you ... and you may be asked to pay damages."

Pratt added that "cases are being brought all over the country about the failure of accessibility."

Under the Fair Housing Act, which was passed in 1968, multifamily housing must include an accessible building entrance, an accessible and usable public/commons area, wide enough doors, light switches, electrical outlets, thermostats and other environmental controls in accessible locations, usable kitchens and bathrooms, and bathrooms with reinforced walls to permit installation of grab bars.

Doorways, for instance, must be at least 32-inches wide to permit

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passage of wheelchairs. Light switches, thermostats and other environmental controls must be no higher than 48 inches off the ground. For that matter, electrical outlets may be placed no lower than 15 inches above the floor.

Fair Housing Act violations include steep walks, inaccessible parking and commons, doorways that are too narrow, and multifamily units that do not allow people with disabilities to move throughout the unit.

The Fair Housing Advisory Commission, chaired by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Ingraham, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, and Margaret K. Suib, the city's fair housing officer, organized the seminar.

"When developers and

architects are designing multifamily housing, they need to keep in mind that there are accessibility requirements under the Fair Housing Act," Suib told *The Hour*.

Suib said state building codes do not address the issue. As such, it is important that builders are aware of the requirements of the Fair Housing Act. Suib couldn't say offhand whether all units with Norwalk's major redevelopment projects, once built, will be complaint with the act.

Pratt, however, described Norwalk as "a very progressive community" through its employment of a fair housing officer and the work of the commission. The Fair Housing Advisory Commission was formed as a result of a settlement between the city and the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People over issues related to affordable housing in Norwalk.

Mayor Richard A. Moccia, also at the seminar, described fair housing as broad area encompassing providing affordable housing, which he said all of the city's major redevelopment projects include, fighting predatory lending, and ensuring compliance with the Fair Housing Act.

Those who believe a multifamily housing unit may not be in compliance with the Fair Housing Act, should call Norwalk Fair Housing Officer Margaret K. Suib at (203) 854-7820.

Staff writer Robert Koch covers City Hall. He can be reached at (203) 254-1007.

Nurse sees everything