

State's housing rules ignore needs of immigrants

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In 1983, New Jersey responded to what it perceived to be a problem, namely segregation, by creating the Council on Affordable Housing for the creation of low- and moderate-income housing. The problem is that COAH's policies make no distinction between institutionalized segregation and organic segregation, the latter being largely voluntary self-selection by immigrants.

COAH's policy has been to disperse affordable-housing units throughout our cities and suburbs. The idea was that access to affordable housing would better match employees with available jobs and that racial and ethnic segregation would be reduced.

Unfortunately, COAH's mandates run counter to the organic development of immigrant communities.

Ethnic enclaves or networks have existed in America for centuries.

Each wave of immigrants has followed a similar pattern: Immigrants sharing the same language, culture and religion form a community in an urban area. Then, established immigrants guide new arrivals in finding living accommodations, immigrants help each other find jobs and access to credit, and community members provide support to one another in social and legal matters.

These networks reduce substantially the stresses and shocks of living within a broader culture that is foreign and intimidating to many immigrants. In addition, ethnic enclaves allow immigrants to invest in and build up valuable social networks, to bond among similar people, and to further of norms of reciprocity.

New Jersey's housing rules completely ignore the special needs of immigrants. By providing incentives to move into housing outside of their ethnic communities, COAH's rules work against immigrants' access to the benefits derived from ethnic enclaves. Given this failure to serve immigrant communities, the state could, nevertheless, effectively address issues of perceived discrimination against immigrants and provide individuals with access to affordable housing and employment.

A different approach is needed to provide access to jobs and accommodate the yearnings of immigrants, many of whom are low-wage earners, as follows.

It is well known that investment in education is the best long-run insurance that low-income persons will have a chance at bettering themselves economically. It is also known that there are substantial economies of scale both in the provision of housing and in delivering educational services. For example, urban areas more readily provide efficient, less costly services for residents of multi-unit housing than do suburbs and, other things being equal, specialized learning teams are more effectively deployed in school systems where there are concentrations of students who would need special services such as language training.

Unfortunately, the Abbott District school-funding program appears to be much less effective than promised. Educational investment in urban areas needs to be maintained but also re-directed to more promising avenues such as charter schools and vouchers.

Also, we should invest in additional mass transportation. By providing easier access to jobs via jitneys, mini-buses and the like, low-income workers would be able to better access available jobs while allowing them to remain in their supportive communities. Efficient, affordable mass transit has, for a long time, been an alternative method of linking an individual's residence and place of employment. Rail and transit services are experiencing a renaissance thanks to continuing concerns about the environment and highway congestion.

We also must increase investment in enforcing anti-discrimination policies in housing, banking and education. Enhanced enforcement will strengthen immigrants' access to resources, thereby improving their long-term economic prospects.

Additionally, we should revisit urban housing regulations, especially those that force low-income families into larger, more expensive housing units, thereby reducing their ability to save and invest in their future. Housing standards that may be too restrictive for first-generation immigrants could be relaxed. Such standards impose the values of native and middle- to upper-income homeowners on immigrants who may desire to sacrifice housing comfort. It is not unusual, for example, to find several family members sharing rooms that would not pass muster under many

municipal housing codes. Immigrants are prevented from making such self-sacrifices because one-size-fits-all housing requirements do not reflect their willingness to give up current living standards for a better future.

These policies would go a long way toward providing immigrants with greater job access while at the same time preserving the social value of ethnic enclaves.

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