

NEWS

State of housing on tap for expanded Austin summit

The Oak Park Regional Housing Center organizes the summits to discuss the state of housing on the West Side, plus resources for home renters and owners



by **Jessica Mordacq**

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Athena Williams, executive director, stands for a photo outside in 2020, on South Boulevard in Oak Park | Alex Rogals

Oak Park Regional Housing Center is expanding its annual housing summit this year.

The event will now be held over two days. That's because OPRHC has so much content to share and there's an increased interest in housing topics, said Athena Williams, executive director of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center.

"Now, people are seeing housing for what it is," she said. "Housing is, first of all, a fundamental right, but second of all, it's a critical need for many people."

April is widely known as **Fair Housing Month** in the United States. At the start of the month, Gov. JB Pritzker joined other governors who have, in past years, declared April **Fair Housing Month**.

April was chosen because the 11th marked 56 years since the Fair Housing Act was passed, aiming to nationally protect people from discrimination when buying a home or accessing resources to do so.

Since it was founded in 1972, the OPRHC has been a local pillar in integrating the community by making housing available to everyone. Every year, in honor of Fair Housing Month, OPRHC puts on a housing summit in Austin. This year's summit will be held April 25 and 27.

"We want people from the West Side, in Austin, Garfield Park and North Lawndale, to understand what the housing market currently looks like because it's a situation where people who live in these communities will no longer be able to afford to buy in their communities," Williams said.

"We really want people to get prepared for that," she added. "And those who want to become homeowners, we want to give them an opportunity to see that it is still reachable."

Programming will begin April 25 from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. at By the Hand Club For Kids, 1841 N. Laramie Ave., with a presentation by DePaul Institute for Housing Studies on the state of housing in Austin, Garfield Park and North Lawndale. Other topics will include upcoming economic developments and safety measures on the West Side.

On April 27 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Michele Clark Magnet High School, 5101 W. Harrison St., programming will include how homeowners can manage property taxes, renters' rights and responsibilities, and a panel with elected officials to discuss new laws in homeownership.

Following that will be breakout sessions — with workshops on estate planning, how to make a down payment and how to improve credit — and an opportunity to visit vendors. There will also be a focus group where attendees can meet with Habitat for Humanity to discuss the types of homes they'd like to see on the West Side.

“People who are current homeowners need to understand how to sustain their homeownership,” Williams said. “People who are seeking to become homeowners, even though right now interest rates are high, still need to understand what they’re getting into with homeownership at this time, becoming homeowners at this time, as well as why it’s still a good idea to become a homeowner.”

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