

## Roxbury community members discuss racism, housing discrimination

By [Esmy Jimenez](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 29, 2024, 5:21 p.m.



Barbara Toney in 2016. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Ninety-four-year-old Barbara Toney remembers when she first tried buying a home with her husband Alfred in the Boston area in the 1950s.

They had three kids and another on the way. Alfred wasn't sure they could afford it but as she tells it, she was willing to live humbly just to make sure they had a place they could call their own. Besides, Alfred had a good job and good credit, and as a veteran of WWII had received benefits through the federal GI Bill that could help them.

Still, "Everywhere we went, once they saw that we were Black they either took the sign out of the window or they took the ad out of the paper because it was already 'rented,' or sold, she shared during a community event in Roxbury Thursday night.

The event centered the stories of local residents who had faced institutionalized racism that specifically targeted Black and brown people and kept them from settling in certain neighborhoods.

The practice of redlining — or refusing loans or insurance to Black people and other groups like Jewish immigrants — meant many families were kept out of homeownership, one of the key factors that builds generational wealth and economic mobility.

Community members listened to the stories of two local residents, including Toney, and learned more about local and federal policies from the 1890s that stretched well into the early 2000s that created the city's current landscape.

Neenah Estrella-Luna, a social equity researcher and advocate who led Thursday night's conversation on the legal practices of that time, pointed to a 1981 [report](#) by the Mayor's Office of Fair Housing that concluded there were "clear and widespread differences in the information given to whites and Blacks about available housing."

The audit found that white people were offered more rental housing opportunities in the neighborhoods studied, leaving Black families to spend more time and effort to find the same housing.

"The city failed to prevent racial disparities that they knew about and failed to protect Black and brown folks from discrimination," Estrella-Luna said. "The city of Boston has a lot to atone for."

More than 40 years later, community groups are still fighting to address this issue. One such initiative now is called [Homes for Equity](#), a proposal that would make changes to housing policies and specifically market affordable homes to Black people in Roxbury through a pilot program.

"We think that we need to do some redress around all the housing discrimination that Black folks and people of color have experienced here in this city," said Maria Latimore, a local consultant and one of the people behind the initiative working with local nonprofits to birth this vision into reality.

So far, the program is in the initial phase as Latimore connects with local developers and gathers political support. There's concern that there would be legal pushback but Latimore believes getting support from Boston leaders would indicate a tangible investment in righting historical wrongs.

Mayor Michelle Wu's office on Friday said in a statement, "these particular proposals are still undergoing legal review."

"Mayor Wu is supportive of doing everything possible to keep Boston residents in their homes and make housing more affordable in every neighborhood across the City," the statement said.

Still, Latimore believes past efforts to improve homeownership among Black people and communities of color have not been enough.

"If we are serious about creating intergenerational wealth for Black people who were discriminated against in the housing market, we gotta do some things differently," she said.

As for Toney, her family managed to find a home despite all the roadblocks.

In 1955, they moved into a green triple-decker on Alpine Street, finally proud homeowners. She told younger people in the audience to be relentless.

"Advocate," she said. "Don't look for them to give you anything."

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