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ADVERTISEMENT

New housing center chief experiences crisis firsthand

By Shelia Byrd
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The incoming executive director of the Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center knows firsthand how tough it is to find a home along the hurricane-stricken region. Charmel Gauden assumes her new job Oct. 1, but she has been unable to find a place to live. "I've been communicating with real estate agents. I just haven't seen any vacancies. You call about a property or you send an e-mail about a property, and it's full," Gauden said in a recent telephone interview with The Associated Press. Her predicament is indicative of the housing crisis on the coast, a situation some say could lead to increased incidences of housing discrimination. More than 200,000 homes and rental units were destroyed or heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina, according to federal estimates. Though many homes are being rebuilt on the Gulf Coast through federal block grant funds, insurance and private monies, thousands of families are still living in FEMA travel trailers or have been priced out of the market. "Discrimination happens when there is enough housing, but when there's not enough housing, landlords and property owners have the opportunity to be even more discriminatory in who they choose," said James H. Perry, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center. "In times like these, 20 or 30 people will try to apply for an apartment or try to buy the same house." The Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center works to ensure that property owners comply with federal laws that prohibit discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status and disability. Perry said two priority categories for Gauden will be the disabled and the growing Hispanic community. Much of the handicapped-accessible housing was destroyed when Hurricane Katrina blew across the coast on Aug. 29, 2005. He said new building codes require raised structures, and "someone who uses a wheelchair can't get up the steps to get into raised houses." Perry believes that many of the Hispanic workers employed in construction and others jobs on the coast also have run into housing barriers. The Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance has filed complaints with the fair housing center about the treatment of Hispanic workers, said Bill Chandler, the organization's executive director. Chandler said some workers have been denied occupancy and others are living in apartments that remain damaged from the storm. "Because of their uncertain immigration status, they have been excluded from any kind of outreach," Chandler said. Gauden, 26, of Savannah, Ga., had served as staff attorney for Dougherty Superior Court in Georgia. She received her degrees from Xavier University and the University of Georgia School of Law. Her legal background is one of the reasons she was hired, said Perry, explaining that the center wants to encourage more residents to file lawsuits over alleged discrimination. Gauden said

she realizes that Katrina has created complex challenges for the housing center and she wants to help develop legislative policies and enforcement measures. Perry said the center supported a proposal in the 2007 Legislature that would create a state fair housing law that corresponds with the federal. "It got killed immediately," Perry said. "There wasn't enough outreach by affordable housing advocates who know the value of such a law."