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## Jefferson Metropolitan Housing Authority Admits It May Have Violated Sunshine Law

Jefferson Metropolitan Housing Authority board members defended their decision to hire an executive director with no ties to the department, although they admitted they may have violated open meeting laws when they did it.

Wednesday's meeting began with an admission by several board members that they may have erred in interviewing and hiring Melody McClurg in secret. By law, public entities in Ohio must, with few exceptions, conduct all business and deliberations in the open.

The board's Sept. 24 meeting, held in the basement of a local church, was not advertised.

Board member Tony Morelli opened Wednesday's meeting by asking the board to vote again, this time in full view of the general public. He also said he'd only recently obtained a copy of the JMHA bylaws, despite saying he had made repeated requests for the information since he was appointed to the board 19 months ago.

*"I'm not going to be on a board that does not follow the bylaws or the Ohio Revised Code, I just won't. But I'll take responsibility that we may have done something wrong,"* Morelli said prior to the do-over, which ended with the board hiring McClurg.

Board member Gerald DiLoreto also said McClurg's contract stipulates the executive director is responsible for day-to-day operations and personnel matters. He said McClurg would answer to the board as a whole, not any individual member.

Board members have insisted race was not a factor in their decision to hire McClurg to take the reigns of the housing authority. McClurg, who is white, is a licensed nursing home administrator and certified dementia practitioner with experience in law enforcement in the public and private sectors. She also has experience in health care and community relations, board members said.

Meanwhile, Gloria Martin, a 23-year employee currently managing three JMHA properties — the 160-unit JFK Apartments on North Sixth Street, the 120-unit Bridgeview Apartments on North Seventh Street and the 55-unit family housing in the North End — wanted the job but wasn't one of the three applicants to score an interview for the position. Martin, president of JMHA's unionized employees, has a bachelor's degree in business from Cleveland's David Myers University.

Ohio Valley Black Caucus President Delores Wiggins said Martin *"wasn't even given a chance to be interviewed,"* even though she's worked for JMHA for more than two decades and helped train previous directors. Wiggins said it was an *"act of board discrimination."*

*"I'm not saying you should have hired her,"* Wiggins said. *"I'm saying she should have been allowed a chance to interview. She was the one minority, she should have had the chance."*

DiLoreto rejected the idea that he'd vote on the basis of race.

*"Speaking for myself, we probably didn't follow procedures regarding the Sunshine Law,"* said DiLoreto who also said he *"could care less where we meet if it means getting a good executive director."*

*"We had 40, 41 applications," Morelli added. "We had no idea who (among them) was black and who was white from their resumes. (Race) just doesn't play to the facts of who we interviewed, we couldn't interview everybody. The reason Gloria wasn't interviewed had nothing to do with that."*

Dr. Frank Petrola, chairman of the board, previously had said McClurg's hiring had nothing to do with race, but took issue with her being a union leader since those are the employees she would be tasked with overseeing.

At the September meeting, he also cited the condition of the JFK apartment complex, saying it looked bad *"and she hasn't asked for additional help through the board."*

*"I don't blame anybody," Petrola said. "All I said was you're in charge and the building is filthy."*

Martin, though, took issue with that, saying she took her concerns over building maintenance and other issues directly to the former executive director, whose job it was to act on them. To have taken her concerns directly to the board would have broken JMHA's chain of command.

She also pointed out the previous director at one time had represented the union employees as well.

*"I just want to be treated fairly," Martin said. "If I wasn't doing my job, I wouldn't have been here 23 years."*

But angry residents attending the meeting complained of dirt as well as infestations of bed bugs and cockroaches, piles of old tires they said were attracting mosquitoes, and said water leaking from air conditioners was damaging flooring and causing mold to grow on carpets. One resident said she had work orders dating back to May that hadn't been addressed.

Ron Byrd Jr., a resident since 2001, said the problems seem rooted in incompetence, not racism.

*"...Common decency (suggests) she should have been interviewed," he said. "Could you not figure out that if you didn't give her the interview what was going to come next? It was flat-out incompetence."*

After the meeting, Morelli said he called for the vote after he and board member Melissa Greco realized they'd made a mistake *"and it was at least up to us to at least try to do the right thing."*

*"We're going in the right direction,"* Morelli said. "I think the problems here can be fixed, but we need to get people working hard to do that.

McClurg declined comment, saying she *"wasn't getting involved in any of it."*

*"I was hired to lead the housing authority in a forward direction,"* she said. *"I will not not get involved in anything going on before me...we've got to push forward, one issue at a time."*

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