

PRESS RELEASE



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Open Communities Executive Director Gail Schechter to Step Down in January; Will Continue to Champion Social Justice Causes

During 22 years as ED, Schechter transformed the Winnetka-based nonprofit into one of the Chicago area's premier service and advocacy organizations for fair and affordable housing; and broadened its mission to advocate for justice in every facet of community life

Winnetka, IL, October 27, 2015 – Gail Schechter, who has led Open Communities for 22 years and transformed it into the premier service and advocacy agency for fair and affordable housing in Chicago's northern suburbs, is leaving the agency in mid-January to pursue new opportunities to advocate for social justice. Schechter, the first full-time Executive Director in the agency's 43-year history, has shepherded the organization into a broader sense of mission that recognizes the imperative to advocate for justice in all aspects of community life so that our neighborhoods truly will become more welcoming.

Schechter will remain at the helm of Open Communities through the middle of January 2016 in order to ensure a smooth and successful transition to a new Executive Director. She will continue to be involved in advancing Open Communities' mission to educate, advocate and organize to promote just and inclusive communities in Chicago's northern suburbs. She also will continue to serve on the State Housing Appeals Board, charged with enforcing the Illinois Affordable Housing Planning and Appeal Act, a law championed by Open Communities.

"Gail has been a visionary, an unflinching supporter to thousands in the northern suburbs who have endured unfair socioeconomic disadvantages, and a mentor to countless others who have sought to organize on their behalf," said Dr. Liliana Fargo, Board President of Open Communities. "Her ability to reimagine community organizing in the northern suburbs by mobilizing individuals and groups based on altruism instead of self-interest is unprecedented.

"We are so grateful that she has put in place an extraordinary team of housing, economic and social justice professionals who are well prepared to take us into the future with the same passionate dedication she always demonstrates, and that she has agreed to remain our wise counselor and advisor whenever we need her."

Schechter became Executive Director of both Open Communities and what is now the Housing Opportunity Development Corp. (HODC) in 1993. Four years later, she was named Open Communities' first full-time director after securing robust funding for each agency. She took the reins from her own mentor, Rayna Miller, who was the organization's founding executive director beginning in 1972 at a time when federal fair housing laws were still new and violations were commonplace. Miller had been one of the leaders of the North Shore Summer Project, a grassroots effort launched in the early 1960s by North Shore residents committed to ending systemic housing discrimination in the northern suburbs.

"I have always looked to those courageous pioneers of housing justice for inspiration as I've worked to make the suburbs more welcoming and inclusive," said Schechter. "In fact, they were foremost in my mind as I came to realize over the years that our biggest challenge in this era is convincing people to embrace the spirit as well as the letter of the law.

“It has been a privilege to serve these wonderful communities and to work side by side with so many who wholeheartedly believe that our cities and villages thrive when our neighborhoods are culturally diverse, and everyone has equal access to housing, educational and economic opportunities. As I pursue other ways in which to serve, I will take Open Communities’ vaunted history and promise-filled present with me.”

Other highlights of Schechter’s tenure include:

- Building Open Communities’ fair housing enforcement capacity, including co-conducting the Chicago region’s HUD-sponsored decennial Housing Discrimination Study 2000 and opening doors to people of color and with disabilities.
- Organizing, educating, and building coalitions with residents and religious leaders in the affluent communities of Northbrook, Park Ridge, Wilmette and Winnetka around affordable housing.
- Organizing tenants living in motels in Morton Grove as they faced displacement, and in the process contributing to changing state Tax Increment Financing law. (1998-2001)
- Working with the Taxicab Organizing Project to save the parking – and therefore housing – rights of mostly Pakistani Muslim and African cab drivers in Skokie. (2007-08)
- Working with Winnetka students to create a monument on the Village Green to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the North Shore Summer Project. (2007)
- Organizing United We Learn, a grassroots coalition of north suburban residents and teachers who recognize that quality education should not depend upon one’s zip code. (2008)

In 2012, Schechter led the organization in unveiling its broadened mission, which was reflected in its name change from Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs to Open Communities. Since then she has ushered in a new era of grassroots organizing and activism in the suburbs under the banner of *The Justice Project: The March Continues*. The Justice Project has identified 19 “Principles of the Welcoming Community”, which give communities a framework to demonstrate that they are taking steps to be more inclusive and give residents the capacity to hold their leaders accountable. The Justice Project, which is facilitated by Open Communities and steered by volunteers, has formed “Justice Teams” in the 17 communities the organization serves. Schechter, a Skokie resident, is a member of the Skokie Justice Team.

In addition to advancing The Justice Project, Open Communities will continue to provide north suburban residents with the following services: the investigation of fair housing discrimination and landlord/tenant advice, foreclosure and predatory lending counseling and prevention, Homesharing, immigrant leadership development, education justice, fair housing education and advocacy, and grassroots organizing. The members of the Open Communities team offer these services free of charge in order to ensure that people of every race, color, creed, ability, sexual orientation, income, age, ethnicity and familial status are welcome in the communities where they choose to live.