NFHA Conference Reflections  
By Wayne Dawson, 2018

My name is Wayne Dawson. I am the Executive Director of the Savannah – Chatham County Fair Housing Council located in Savannah, Georgia. I am responsible for the overall day-to-day operations of the organization.

In order to attend and participate in the annual NFHA conference, I needed accessible transportation (i.e., wheelchair taxi), an accessible hotel bedroom, and an accessible meeting space. Also, as I moderated two sessions at the Conference, it was important that the raised dais at the front of room had wheelchair access. (This is an often overlooked conference feature when people with mobility disabilities are presenters.)

Disability rights are civil rights, and civil rights include disability rights. Lack of access presents the same barrier to participation as limitations on any of the other protected classes. Disability is one of the seven classes of person that are protected by the Federal Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988. In fact, disability represents the highest volume of housing discrimination complaints filed with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 2017, fifty-seven percent (57%) of the HUD complaints were based upon disability. As a person with a disability, I am uniquely situated to educate other people with disabilities on their rights under the Federal Fair Housing Act, as well as to enjoy the benefits that the act provides.

My favorite portion of the NFHA Conference is the annual Legal Update. During this session, well-known law school professor and respected author, Robert Schwemm, and one or more fair housing trial attorneys review the significant fair housing cases resolved over the previous year. Over the years, I have been able to apply recent, relevant housing discrimination cases that have been resolved throughout the country to directly assist local clients in enjoying their fair housing rights.

Absent funding through the Conference Accessibility Initiative, sponsored by J.P. Morgan Chase and the World Institute on Disability, I would be unable to attend this important event. By including people with obvious disabilities, the overall conference is improved for all participants. Diversity of the participants – to include people with disabilities – subtly conveys a message of inclusion and integration.

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Wayne Dawson is the Executive Director of the Savannah – Chatham County Fair Housing Council located in Savannah, GA. He is also a board member of the National Fair Housing Alliance. In 1994, he found Savannah anything but hospitable to someone who needed wheelchair-accessible housing, and he has worked diligently since then to eradicate housing discrimination in his community.
Wayne as a Disability Ambassador

Wayne as a panel moderator