

County rentals flunk discrimination test

Study finds many landlords still hamper rental process for certain groups



Results

Number of Umatilla County tests detecting discrimination:

Renters with children: 8 out of 10

Disabled renters: 5 out of 8

Foreign renters: 5 out of 10

Non-white renters: 5 out of 10

Posted: Sunday, April 17, 2011 7:12 am | Updated: 7:10 am, Sun Apr 17, 2011.

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East Oregonian |

Housing discrimination is no longer so flagrant. Rental signs and real estate listings don't use phrases such as "no blacks" or "adults only" anymore.

Discrimination, however, is still alive in Umatilla County and around the state. A recent study by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon revealed that landlords often treat potential renters differently depending on their race, whether they have children, if they are disabled or are foreign.

"The form discrimination takes today is rarely the overt discrimination found in the 1950s, when some Oregon housing developments had signs saying 'No Negroes or Asiatics Allowed Except Domestic Servants ...,'" said Diane Hess, FHCO education and outreach director. "Discrimination today is far more subtle ..."

Instead of turning someone away, a landlord might simply jack up the rent or ask for a higher deposit.

Researchers found high levels of such discrimination in Umatilla County, especially Pendleton.

Testers posed as people in the market for a rental unit. They worked the phones and also visited landlords and property managers in Pendleton, Hermiston, Umatilla, McNary and Athena. The survey also included large and small apartment complexes and rental homes in Polk County, Klamath Falls, the North Oregon Coast, Eugene, Portland, Beaverton and Corvallis.

Renters with children, individuals with disabilities, blacks and Hispanics faced high levels of discrimination in Umatilla County.

"In one case, a couple with children was told of an extra \$300 deposit that the couple without children was not given," said Alyssa Cudmore, who oversaw the Umatilla County testing.

In other scenarios, inquiries were made by a white couple and a black couple, couples with and without children and an individual with a

service animal.

“The question was, were they treated the same way?” Hess said.

Often, they weren't. Eight out of 10 conclusive tests done in Umatilla County, for example, showed discrimination against families with children. Five of eight tests show discrimination against renters with disabilities. Half of the 10 tests involving national origin showed discrimination, three of those in Pendleton. Five of 10 tests measuring racial discrimination came out positive.

“A wide range of differential treatment was reported,” Hess said.

During one afternoon of testing, a white couple and a black couple visited the same landlord within an hour of each other. The property owner greeted the white couple with enthusiasm and gave a personal tour of the entire complex. He handed them an application to fill out and didn't mention any background inquiries.

When the black couple appeared, the landlord lost his exuberance, barely talking and making little eye contact. He escorted them to the apartment, but stood by the door as the couple walked through the unit. He warned they would have to pass criminal, credit and background checks.

This landlord's performance was abysmal, but not unique, said Hess and Cudmore.

Some of the testing was done over the phone. A person with a distinct, yet understandable, Hispanic accent called landlords asking about rentals. The caller had tough going and was told more than once the unit he was inquiring about wasn't available.

“He found blatant discrimination,” Cudmore said. “There were many times the Hispanic tester called and was hung up on the moment he said ‘Hello.’”

When apartment seekers with disabilities inquired about rentals, they were sometimes told of a no pet policy or asked to pay extra for their service animal, illegal since 1988. Some landlords told applicants children weren't allowed.

Often, though, the discrimination came in subtler forms, maybe the landlord remarking the rental wasn't really a good place for a child.

“That's called steering,” Cudmore said. “That is actually illegal. The landlord's job is just to show them the property.”

Cudmore and Hess urged landlords to become familiar with federal and state laws governing housing. Failure to do so can result in steep fines. In a nutshell, the federal Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, familial status and disability. In addition, the State of Oregon adds sexual orientation, source of income and marital status to the list.

This time around, the Fair Housing Council was simply interested in research. Other times, they partner in investigations that lead to prosecutions.

In the study, testers found similar problems elsewhere in the state.

“In no area did we find no discrimination,” Hess said.

The study found high levels of discrimination against Hispanics in most areas tested. Portland and Polk County also received bad marks for treating blacks unfairly. Corvallis, North Coast and Polk County landlords showed high levels of discrimination against people with disabilities. Renters with children found serious discrimination in Klamath Falls and the North Coast.

The study was commissioned by the State of Oregon and the cities of Portland, Eugene, Beaverton and Corvallis.

Hess encouraged landlords who may be confused about housing laws to call the FHCO hotline at 503-223-8197 (ext. 2) or 800-424-3247 (ext. 2). She also invited those who believe they are a victim of housing discrimination to call the hotline.