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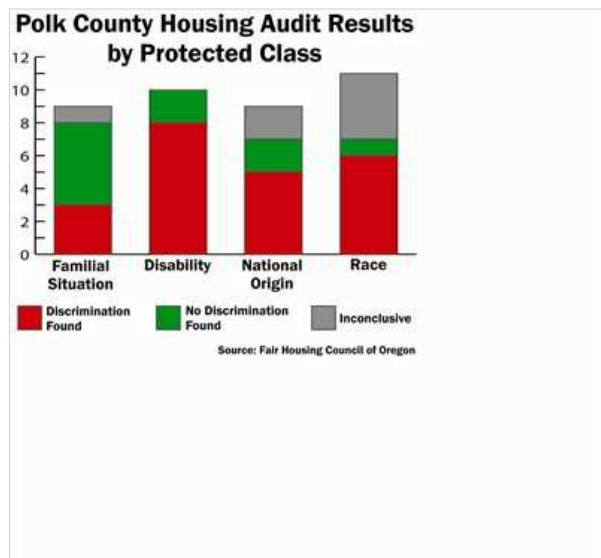
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Discrimination found in rentals

POLK COUNTY -- A recent Fair Housing Council of Oregon (FHCO) study shows those seeking housing in Polk County may still face high levels of discrimination.



Graphic by Pete Strong

Jolene Guzman

POLK COUNTY -- A recent Fair Housing Council of Oregon (FHCO) study shows those seeking housing in Polk County may still face high levels of discrimination.

The study tested rentals in Dallas, Monmouth and Independence and found discrimination against African-Americans in six out of 11 tests conducted and individuals with disabilities in eight out of 11 tests.

Discrimination was also found based on familial status -- applicants with children -- and national origin.

The study used "paired testing" with two trained individuals posing as applicants for vacant units. The testers were assigned identical characteristics, except for race, national origin, familial status or disability.

Diane Hess, the FHCO education director, said though discrimination was found in more than half the tests in Polk County, the numbers were not unusual.

"I was not surprised," she said. "I have seen this a number of times."

She said discrimination of some form was found in all the other Oregon communities tested.

The Oregon Housing and Community Services and Oregon Business and Development departments and the cities of Portland, Beaverton, Corvallis and Eugene

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funded the study. Polk County was included to collect data in regions outside the major population centers of the state. Klamath Falls, Umatilla County and the North Coast (Clatsop, Tillamook and Lincoln counties) also were included in the study.

"The point of the test is getting a sense of where the problems are," Hess said.

Alyssa Cudmore, FHCO's administrative project manager, said blatant discrimination is rare, but subtle forms are common. The study found landlords quoting different rent rates, deposit rates and application fees, not telling people about rent specials, or trying to persuade applicants to rent elsewhere.

Federal law prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status and disability. Under Oregon law it's illegal to discriminate based on marital status, sexual orientation or source of income.

Cudmore, who was part of the testing in Polk County, said the most egregious incidents of discrimination occurred in the national origin and disabilities tests.

Cudmore said in a national origin test, the test caller was told the deposit was \$300 to \$600, depending on credit, while the comparative tester was told the deposit was simply \$300. She said people with disabilities were told service animals would not be allowed, a refusal illegal since 1988.

Cudmore said in one test an African-American tester made an appointment to see an available rental unit in Polk County. The landlord stood outside the unit while the man looked at it and didn't offer an application afterward. In contrast, the comparative tester, who was white, was given a guided tour and offered an application. Cudmore said the differences in treatment might not have been noticed if not for the test.

Cudmore said one form of discrimination is disguised as the landlord trying to be helpful, when it may actually be an attempt to chase applicants away.

"In some of these cases, the agent tried to discourage people from moving in," she said.

The tactic, called "steering," is illegal and can include telling an applicant a rental is not suitable for their situation and directing them elsewhere. Deciding whether a unit is a good fit is up to the applicant, Cudmore said.

Hess said these situations can easily be avoided.

"Landlords and property managers need to have protocol to deal with applicants with consistency," she said.

The tests, conducted each year in a number of communities, are just one tool the agency uses to gauge how much and where discrimination is occurring, Hess said. Another is the agency's hotline, which 33 Polk County residents called during the past year ending March 31.

Hess said the results found in this study will be used to help the agency determine what further outreach is necessary -- for landlords and tenants -- to eradicate discrimination.

"We are working with the state to determine how to educate to make sure the tenants and applicants know what their rights are," Hess said.

Need Help?

* To report housing discrimination or for more information, call the FHCO discrimination hotline at 1-503-223-8197, ext. 2, or 1-800-424-3247, ext. 2. For more information about fair housing and FHCO, visit www.fhco.org.