



A rental market rife with racism

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By **The Oregonian Editorial Board**

At one apartment building, the prospective African American tenant was told a rental requirement was to provide pay stubs -- proof of regular income. Somehow, that requirement was not passed along to another prospective tenant, who was white, at the same building.

At another Portland building, the African American was told by an agent that the range of move-in costs would be \$1,495 to \$2,040. Such costs, however, for the prospective white tenant would be \$720 to \$740.

You could call these differences in treatment the price of racism in Portland. If you were an outright racist you might call it the price of keeping things white in Portland. But if you wanted to call it for what it is, you would describe it as inexcusable, illegal behavior on the part of housing owners in a city that in 2011 touts itself as progressive, inclusive, tolerant, ahead of the rest.

As long as this sort of thing goes on, we're not -- by a long shot. And the price it exacts from our present and future far exceeds the difference in dollars: It hobbles our capacity to be among the best.

It's time, if late, that we fix it.

A survey performed last summer for the city of Portland found discrimination runs rampant in the rental housing sector. In 50 cases in which a precisely scripted black or Latino person inquired about renting, 32 were found to be discriminated against. Compounding the bias is the fact that in most cases, the test renters did not know they were being misled, lied to, screened away from ever pocketing rental keys -- it took white candidates to follow up and get better deals to reveal the double-dealing.

If this is a particularly hidden and thus insidious form of racism, it will take particularly resourceful leaders to find quick, example-setting remedies. Right now, the remedies are hard for most victims to shoulder.

Complaints are typically referred to agencies charged with enforcing federal and state fair housing laws. The renter might ask the federal **Department of Housing and Urban Development** or the **Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries** to pursue an administrative action, potentially resulting in monetary penalties against the landlord. If the aggrieved has money to burn, he or she might hire a lawyer and sue for an award. And the **Fair Housing Council of Oregon** could help advocate for a victim, in some cases not for a reward but to reverse a landlord's practices.

But these things won't turn the tide. Portland's survey is proof enough that people whose race or ethnicity is apparent

are cluelessly punished in violation of heralded, long-standing laws.

It seems to us that those doing the illegal screening need the punishing -- and soon.

Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the **Portland Housing Bureau**, says he will strategically pursue such a course by working with the **Oregon Department of Justice**, among others. But any actions would be directed at persistent violators against whom cases could be successfully brought -- and a loud example set.

We wonder, meanwhile, why there can't be a simple, swift administration of punitive fines, something for which the city has no current apparatus in place. We live in a day when speeding tickets arrive with a fine, reliably forcing many drivers to decide left-lane cruising at 80 mph -- a public threat, incidentally -- isn't really worth it.

Ensuring our laws have teeth requires just two things: honoring the constitutional guarantee of due process and engaging our imaginations. We can and must find a way to hold landlords accountable now, not later or at all. Racism -- another form of public threat, incidentally -- is ripe for everyday law enforcement.

It isn't even Portland's reputation that's at stake. It's Portland's soul.

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