

When Finding a Home Becomes a Nightmare

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By Beth Albert and Rita Fitzgerald

Chris W. was recently separated when her landlord told her that her rental home was being sold and she would have to find other housing for herself and her two children. She immediately started scouring the ads for a new place –“nothing fancy, just decent and affordable.” Rents were high but she was working as a school bus driver as well as receiving child support- surely she would find something quickly.

After weeks of searching the classifieds, calling landlords, and visiting apartments after work and on Saturday mornings, and with an imminent move-out date, she finally got her new housing - *a homeless shelter* . How did it happen?

Chris had been told repeatedly by landlords that they would not rent to her in spite of the fact that she had adequate income, good credit, and an excellent rental history. She was denied housing because she had “baggage” that many landlords find unacceptable. And what was this huge obstacle to finding a place to live? *She had children under the age of 18 living with her.*

Denying housing or setting different conditions simply because there are children in the household has been illegal in the United States since 1988. Although this practice –called *familial status discrimination* is expressly outlawed by the Federal Fair Housing Act, it continues to be one of the most persistent forms of housing discrimination in America.

Common illegal activities range from a landlord’s outright refusal to rent to families with children, to charging higher rents or security deposits when kids are involved, or insisting that a boy and a girl cannot share a bedroom, thereby forcing the family to pay even more for rent. “We’ve made education on familial status discrimination a priority because it occurs so frequently and is one of the most misunderstood type of housing discrimination”, says Beth Albert, Executive Director of the Fair Housing Council of Montgomery County. “While most people know that refusing to rent to someone because of their race or national origin is illegal, the majority of people still think that it’s perfectly legal to deny housing to a family with children. ”

When this practice is compounded by a rental market where affordable units for low and moderate income households are already scarce, the consequences can be devastating.

Too-few affordable apartments *together with* housing discrimination against families with children can result a family having NO housing options at all!

At the Fair Housing Council last year, complaints of familial status discrimination ranked third, after race and disability, as the most common complaint lodged against housing providers. This data mirrors housing trends nationwide which indicate that housing discrimination against families with children is widespread and often goes unchallenged.

The Council has just launched a major ‘Familial Status’ Campaign to educate the public and housing providers about housing discrimination affecting families with children. Thousands of flyers and posters have been distributed to childcare, human services, and governmental agencies in the region along with TV public service announcements, newspaper and SEPTA bus advertising throughout the Delaware Valley . The message:

Familial Status Discrimination is ILLEGAL and it hurts families .

And what happened to Chris and the children? It took her a full four months of living at the shelter and then two years at a transitional housing program to finally find permanent housing. After her ordeal she filed a complaint with the Fair Housing Council against the landlord who refused to rent to her and her children. The case was settled at HUD. Chris used her portion of the settlement as a down payment on a house and is now a homeowner.

The Council’s enforcement program is aimed at resolving charges of discrimination through intervention, investigations of allegations of discriminatory activity, and the filing of administrative complaints or lawsuits. The Council also offers workshops to the general public, landlords, property managers, realtors, housing advocates, social service agencies, and governmental staff to promote a better understanding of federal and state fair housing laws and to expand equal housing opportunities.

The Fair Housing Council of Montgomery County is a non-profit advocacy organization founded in 1990 to deal with the problem of housing discrimination in the county. Supported by federal, state, county and private funding, the Council works to uphold the federal Fair Housing Act and state laws which prohibit discrimination in housing transactions based on race, religion, color, sex, disability, national origin, and the presence of children in the home.