

Fair Housing Month Celebrated with a Landlord Gala

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April is “Fair Housing Month”. Exactly what does that mean? Is this just another one of those “National Something Awareness” Months? Hardly.

We reflect on a time ending less than 40 years ago, when a person could be denied housing simply on the basis of their race or religion. An era when one could have every qualification that a landlord or realtor could reasonably want: adequate income//good credit/ good character and STILL the only thing that would really count would be the color of your skin. Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. By the time of his funeral a week later, the Federal Fair Housing Act was finally passed - an enduring testament to his life's work. Thereafter, a person could not legally be treated differently by a landlord/realtor/broker because of race or religion. Fair housing laws were later amended to include other groups as well- i.e. people with disabilities, and families with children under 18 for example. These days even a bigot is not going to stick a sign out on his lawn blatantly stating: “Apartment for Rent- Whites Only” I guess we should be happy for that, but discrimination still very much exists, usually masked in less obvious clothing.

Every April, the Fair Housing Council celebrates Fair Housing Month with a special event. This year we have decided to put our energies into organizing a “**Montgomery County Landlord Reception**” sponsored by the Montgomery County Housing Coalition (of which we, the Fair Housing Council of MC are a member agency) along with the MC Dept of Housing & Community Development and the Apartment Association of Greater Philadelphia. It has been planned to be both informational and social - i.e. it's an “Ask-The-Experts” Forum at the Westover Country Club in Jeffersonville. *But why have we decided to focus on landlords this time?*

Our agency, as part of our mission, provides information about the fair housing laws - including assistance to people who feel they may have been victims of housing discrimination. So we talk to a lot of people, tenants especially. In addition to fair housing, we usually get a lot of questions from bewildered renters about basic landlord-tenant issues: “ My landlord doesn't do repairs”; “ How do I get my security deposit back?”; “I'm being evicted- what do I do? “ etc. Usually we give them some general information and then refer them for legal assistance if appropriate.

Occasionally we also receive calls -sometimes even anonymously- from landlords who are seeking information about THEIR rights and responsibilities. The question might center on accommodating a person with a disability or maybe about occupancy limits or legally evicting a destructive tenant. It may be from a small “Mom & Pop” landlord or the manager at a large apartment complex. There is one thing we've gleaned from these calls- THERE'S A LOT OF MIS-INFORMATION OUT THERE. I have even seen inaccuracies packaged as `useful facts' in books and on websites supposedly servicing landlords. This has led us to organize an event specifically for landlords- to address the misinformation and get their myriad questions and concerns answered.

The evening reception on April 27 will offer a carefully chosen panel of these experts - including our fair housing director, a private attorney and a local district justice who each deal extensively with landlord- tenant issues, the regional director of HUD, and other housing professionals who handle special-needs rental populations. The goal of this event is to offer landlords and managers free practical advice about landlord-tenant, fair housing, and other housing issues. It's about addressing legal issues, best practices, and industry trends, and allowing landlords to network with other landlords, panelists, and housing agency staff.

So why are we doing it? Because landlords are key business people providing one of the most important needs in our society - rental housing. They deserve to have the facts.

Rita Fitzgerald is Education and Outreach Coordinator at the Fair Housing Council of Montgomery County- a member organization of the Montgomery County Housing Coalition. The Coalition is a consortium of dozens of non-profit and governmental housing agencies in the county dedicated to increasing housing opportunities for all residents of Montgomery County. To learn more about the Housing Coalition, call 215 723-8750.