

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION: THE SOCIETAL DISEASE THAT WON'T GO AWAY

FAIR HOUSING HIGHLIGHT #32

Everybody knows that in the past some people- like African Americans- were treated unfairly when looking for housing, but what about now? You no longer see ads saying “whites only”...does discrimination *really* still happen?

Although it's been almost 40 years since the Federal Fair Housing Act outlawed it, housing discrimination constitutes **the most persistent form of discrimination** in the United States. A recent study estimated that discrimination based on race or ethnicity occurs *3, 700,000 times per year*—about 1 in 4 housing transactions. *What has changed in the last 40 years is the manner of discrimination.* Because it has become less blatant and more subtle, people don't realize how often it still goes on.

What does housing discrimination look like today?

Few people who intend to discriminate would expose themselves to legal and financial liability by openly stating an illegal preference based on race or ethnicity. So housing discrimination nowadays usually doesn't involve a bigoted remark or outright denial. But it can be cloaked in statements that may be more general or evasive such as: “Your credit check isn't back yet”, “We don't have anything available right now”; “I'm sorry, the seller decided to take it off the market”; “We rented the unit right after you called - we'll get back to you if something else becomes available”. Other differences may include attractive incentives *that are offered to some applicants and not others*. Some applicants *may receive follow up calls and letters, and others do not*. Families with children are denied housing due to restrictive occupancy requirements (i.e. “one person only per bedroom”) or hear discouraging comments such as “the neighbors downstairs are retired and kids will disturb them” or “There aren't any other children living in the complex for them to play with” or “it's not suitable for kids”. But discrimination isn't just based on race or having children. In fact, the highest numbers of complaints we receive are from people who are denied housing or face eviction *due to their disabilities*. Questioning a potential tenant about their capacity to live independently or a landlord demanding assurances that a person with a mental health disability will stay on their medications as a condition of renting to them are violations of the law!

But if a landlord quietly, without advertising, limits tenants to certain groups, just because he is “more comfortable with them” - well, that's not illegal is it?

YES IT IS! Whether or not a property is advertised— a landlord may not discriminate. He may not consider factors other than valid screening criteria - i.e. income, credit, criminal background, or rental history in determining whether or not to rent to a prospective tenant. These standards should be exactly the same for every applicant.

**Questions? Call the Fair Housing Rights Center in Southeastern Pennsylvania at 215-576-7711
or visit us online at www.fairhousingrights.org.**