



City of Seattle

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Seattle Office for Civil Rights

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Testing confirms African Americans and people with disabilities face frequent rental housing discrimination in Seattle

City files charges against six property owners for alleged violations

Housing discrimination occurs frequently in Seattle, according to test results just released by the City of Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR). SOCR has filed director's charges of illegal discrimination against six property owners based on practices revealed by the testing. More than half of all properties tested showed evidence of illegal housing discrimination.

"These results confirm that housing discrimination is the reality for many people who live in Seattle," said Mayor Mike McGinn. "That is simply not acceptable. The actions that we are taking as a response to these results will help us to become a more equitable city."

Properties tested for race and disability; evidence of discrimination in half of all results

SOCR conducted a total of fifty-six tests, including nine re-tests. Twenty-six tests focused on race, using African American and white testers. The other twenty-one tests focused on disability access for people who use a wheelchair or service animal.

Overall, 55% of the tests showed evidence of illegal discrimination. In the tests for race-based discrimination, 69% showed patterns of inconsistencies that generally favored white testers. The inconsistencies included quoting a higher rent to African American testers, not telling African American testers about move-in specials, or using different screening criteria with African American testers, including credit or criminal background checks.

In the tests for disability-based discrimination, 38% showed patterns of inconsistencies that create barriers for people with disabilities. The inconsistencies included refusing to accommodate service animals, not telling testers about available units, or not providing parking areas with spots designated for people with disabilities.

"We're filing charges in six cases where the differences in treatment based on race or disability are unambiguous," said Julie Nelson, Director of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights. "Where we find clear evidence of discrimination, we must act to protect the public."

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“As a community, we cannot afford to allow discrimination in housing,” said Seattle City Councilmember Bruce Harrell. “Knowing these test results help us to re-dedicate ourselves to work for greater fairness across Seattle.” Councilmembers Harrell and Tim Burgess asked SOCR to conduct the tests late last year.

SOCR also has offered resources and training to all property managers in an effort to promote equitable housing.

Testers posed as renters in person, over the telephone

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights contracted with the Fair Housing Center of Washington to conduct the tests. In most cases, the Fair Housing Center used paired testers posing as prospective renters to measure differences in the services they received from leasing agents, as well as information about vacancies, rental rates, and other conditions. The matched pairs of testers had similar rental profiles in every respect except for their race or disability. All on-site and telephone testing was concluded by mid-July, 2011.

“The testing provided a snapshot of normal, everyday business practices,” said Jennifer Yogi of the Seattle Human Rights Commission. “Most fair housing enforcement is complaint-driven – that is, an individual files a charge with the Office for Civil Rights against a specific housing provider. Testing allows the city to go beyond this, assess current conditions and take steps to address problems in the rental market.”

Fair housing is the goal

SOCR is meeting with managers whose test results showed some evidence of discrimination to evaluate their rental process and to provide fair housing resources to help them to improve their policies and procedures.

“Seattle’s rental management community works to promote fair and equitable housing for all Seattle residents,” said Julie Johnson, President of the Rental Housing Association, an organization for residential property managers throughout Puget Sound. “We know that the majority of property managers are hardworking, fair people who provide a vital service. We are working to increase our members’ use of fair housing policies and practices, and we encourage all rental housing owners to seek professional training like that offered by RHA.”

SOCR offers ongoing education and training programs to landlords and property managers, including [free bi-monthly training](#) held in conjunction with Fair Housing Partners of Washington, a regional fair housing consortium.