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## **City files 23 charges against property owners for alleged violations of rental housing discrimination**

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) has filed 23 director's charges of illegal discrimination against 23 different property owners after a new round of fair housing testing showed evidence of housing discrimination.

"Housing discrimination is real in Seattle – not something that just happens in other places," said Seattle Mayor Ed Murray. "These test results tell us that we still have work to do to achieve fair housing in Seattle."

The testing revealed that prospective renters experienced different treatment from Seattle landlords across all three categories that were tested: familial status, disability, and use of a federal Section 8 voucher.

To address housing discrimination citywide, the Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) will reach out to landlords and renters, including working with community partners to hold workshops for both landlords and the public.

### **Testing discovered evidence of different treatment**

SOCR conducted a total of 97 tests, focusing on three different groups protected under fair housing laws.

Test findings revealed:

- Familial status (32 tests): 2 charges / 31% of all tests showed evidence of different treatment.
- Disability (33 tests): 6 charges / 64% of all tests showed evidence of different treatment.
- Section 8 voucher (32 tests): 13 charges / 63% of all tests showed evidence of different treatment.

SOCR also filed 2 additional charges (national origin and marital status) based on information that emerged from two of the tests.

SOCR contracted with the Northwest Fair Housing Alliance in Spokane to coordinate the testing, which was conducted by telephone and e-mail. To test for hearing disability, testers used Washington State's free Telecommunication Relay Service. Testers posed as prospective renters, so the different treatment they experienced depended on the information they received from landlords and the questions they were asked.

For familial status, some landlords provided less information about rental units to testers who said they had children than they did to testers who indicated they did not have children. One manager advertised for "professional tenants only." Testers found that some landlords' occupancy standards (the number of people legally allowed to occupy units of specific sizes) were too restrictive: for example, requiring a maximum of two people for a 2-bedroom apartment.

In the disability tests, some landlords refused to allow a service animal, refused to waive pet fees, or hung up repeatedly when they received a call from the Washington State relay service.

Some landlords refused to respond to applicants who mentioned using a Section 8 voucher or simply turned away Section 8 applicants. Other landlords refused to consider adjusting their leasing policies to consider Section 8 applicants.

"We have filed 23 charges where the differences in treatment were undeniable," said Patricia Lally, Director of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights. "These test results are not isolated incidents – they demonstrate patterns of behavior that have profound impacts on people's lives."

SOCR sent letters to all tested property owners and management companies informing them of their individual test results, and has offered to meet with managers whose test results showed some evidence of discrimination to evaluate their rental process and to help them improve their policies and procedures.

### **Fair housing outreach to address housing discrimination**

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights will launch a new round of outreach and public engagement to address housing discrimination in Seattle, including free training to property management staff on request, and working with community partners to provide fair housing workshops for organizations and the general public.

"It is unfortunate that SOCR testing revealed that some renters face additional barriers to housing, but this also illustrates an opportunity for the City and rental housing industry to partner in offering fair housing education for landlords," said Rental Housing Association of Washington (RHAWA) Executive Director, Melany Brown. "We believe that organizations such as RHAWA can be an asset to the city, and raise the standards for the entire industry."

### **How fair housing testing works**

Fair housing testing uses 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 have similar rental profiles in every respect except for the protected class being tested – that is, family status, disability and use of a Section 8 voucher. Test sites were selected at random from all geographic areas of the city, and were conducted from September to December, 2015.

The Office for Civil Rights receives \$50,000 in City funding to conduct testing on an annual basis. [In-person paired testing in 2014 revealed discriminatory housing practices](#) based on race, national origin, sexual orientation and gender identity.

### **Mission of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights**

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights is a department of the City of Seattle, responsible for enforcing the City's anti-discrimination laws within Seattle city limits. SOCR offers ongoing education and training programs to landlords and property managers, including [free quarterly training](#) held in conjunction with Fair Housing Partners of Washington, a regional fair housing consortium. For more information about fair housing or the Seattle Office for Civil Rights, contact 206-684-4507.