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For Rent - Just Not to You

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by: *Deb Price, t r u t h o u t / Op-Ed*

A transgender apartment-hunter thought he'd found a perfect place in Baltimore. But when he showed up, the woman raised the rent by \$100 over the advertised price, said she would only take cash and was clearly uncomfortable.

"She asked me if I was a boy or a girl, and after I explained everything, her tone noticeably changed. I then had a female friend of the same age inquire about that very apartment, and she was given the original price and was told that a check would be an acceptable form of payment."

Sadly, the experience of "Owen S.," reported to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is all too common.

Last year, the Task Force joined forces with the National Center for Transgender Equality to survey 6,456 transgender people. An alarming 11 percent reported having been evicted because of their gender identity and 19 percent said they'd become homeless, the survey found. And while 68 percent of Americans own a home, only 32 percent of transgender Americans have achieved that level of security in their living arrangements.

Of course, gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans are also frequently the victims of housing discrimination. Using testers posing as would-be renters or buyers, the Michigan Fair Housing Centers reported in 2007 that 27 percent of same-sex couples were treated differently: "We found differences in rental rates, level of encouragement and application fees that favored the male/female

test teams. We also saw behavior bordering on sexual harassment directed toward testers posing as same-sex couples," the group noted.

One Detroit landlord, for example, said, "No drugs, prostitution, homosexuality, one-night stands."

Likewise, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported in 2001 that 34 percent of lesbians, gays or bisexuals said "they or someone they know" had experienced discrimination while trying to rent an apartment or buy a house.

Nothing in federal law prohibits refusing to rent or sell to those of us who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. And as Rep. Jerry Nadler, a New York Democrat, recently stressed, "Housing discrimination remains a persistent problem in our country."

Nadler, chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, made that point at a groundbreaking hearing on March 11 devoted in part to looking at anti-LGBT bias in the housing market.

"Jim Crow laws and restrictive covenants may no longer be with us, but the discriminatory attitudes and practices they represented remain," Nadler added.

Nadler recently introduced legislation to amend the Fair Housing Act to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the protected categories. Enacted in 1968 to outlaw housing discrimination based on race, color, religion or national origin, the measure has gradually been expanded to also cover sex, disability and familial status. House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers, D-Mich., is co-sponsoring Nadler's drive for a much-needed upgrade.

Eighteen states and Washington, D.C., ban anti-gay housing discrimination, of which 12 and D.C., also prohibit housing bias based on gender identity, according to the Human Rights Campaign. That means that in more than half the nation LGBT Americans have zero protection from severely misguided landlords, real estate agents or homeowners.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is preparing to launch a first-of-its-kind national investigation of housing discrimination against LGBT Americans. At hud.gov, the department is collecting suggestions about smart ways to proceed.

Task Force Executive Director Rea Carey, who testified at Nadler's hearing, praises HUD's determination to document the problem, but emphasizes the pressing need to broaden federal housing protections to include LGBT Americans.

"For us, the pursuit of the American dream, including home ownership, is a risky proposition," she said.

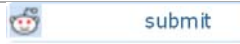
Want to put down roots for six months or a lifetime? Want someplace to call "home sweet home"? Housing discrimination shouldn't be allowed to get in the way. It's wrong. And it ought to be illegal.

Deb Price of The Detroit News writes the first nationally syndicated column on gay issues.

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