



Portland's bold plan to expose rental discrimination

Published: Saturday, June 11, 2011, 3:00 PM



By **The Oregonian Editorial Board**

When it comes to ethnic inclusion and race tolerance, Oregon has had a history of being a bit behind others in truly "getting it." Our constitution originally barred black people from moving here at all, and vestigial race references in it were bleached away by the Legislature barely a decade ago. That's why it hurt when we learned this year that black and Latino testers acting as rental candidates in Portland were found by the **Fair Housing Council of Oregon** to be discriminated against more than 60 percent of the time.

And that's why it's especially heartening that the city is going to do something loud about it --now and going forward.

The plan announced Friday by **City Commissioner Nick Fish** requires such testing annually, at expanded rates and always unannounced, in leasing offices and mom-and-pop venues throughout Portland. The testing results, significantly, will be tracked by a newly appointed Fair Housing Advocacy Committee whose job it will be to tell us whether we're improving, with the most egregious of the findings turned over to state civil rights investigators to pursue. Meanwhile a key landlord group, the **Metro Multifamily Housing Association**, will underwrite cold-call testing of its own and make training sessions in fair housing law part of membership.

These are bold, right-minded measures designed to check hard against housing practices in need of examination.

It already is unclear from the first round of testing whether some of the findings are one-time anomalies, no less injurious for it but possibly ephemeral: Did the landlord's clueless nephew substitute for the trained leasing agent during a tester's visit, or was the reported deception part of a pattern from a landlord who should know better?

In any case, no landlord in Oregon wants to be tagged a racist, and no landlord expecting to protect his or her enterprise can afford to be a lawbreaker.

The initiatives, coupled with a robust education outreach to citizens and landlords alike, will go a long way toward ensuring outcomes commensurate with Portland's sense of itself as a dynamic, inclusive city. But they must be undertaken in measured steps marked by rigor and accountability -- a first and sustained priority of the new advocacy committee. Landlords deserve it as well as all citizens.

The civil rights division of the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries receives about 42,000 calls a year from folks aggrieved not just in housing situations but also in work and commerce environments, roughly 2,000 of them turning into full cases that are processed. Some of Portland's fair housing test results will now go into that massive flow, a fact that only raises the bar on consistency and transparency in all testing methods employed.

In announcing his **Fair Housing Action Plan**, Fish conflated Portland's broader low-income housing needs with his blunt new remedies against discrimination -- a logical, if ambitious, reach.

It's true that it would be an empty victory to break down barriers to housing only to find there wasn't any available. But as the city maps areas in need of access to opportunity and transportation and tries to find low-income rental units suitable for whole families, its smartest leaders must show uncommon focus and follow-through in responsibly hunting down discrimination in the housing market.

That's because we need to win this one if we are to win in any other way.

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