

Study shows Ashland biased against black renters

Two-thirds of landlords tested showed signs of discrimination; nearly half discriminatory against those with disabilities, kids

April 15, 2010

By **Hannah Guzik**
for the Mail Tribune

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ASHLAND — A study commissioned by the city shows a "shockingly high rate of discrimination" against blacks seeking to rent housing in Ashland.

The Fair Housing Council of Oregon found that six of nine landlords, or two-thirds, expressed racial bias when showing a rental to a black tester.

The study, completed in June, also found that three of seven testers with children and three of seven with disabilities, or about 43 percent in each category, received discriminatory treatment.

The council completed 33 housing discrimination tests in all in spring 2009.

"It's unfortunate that, still in this day and age, this type of discrimination is commonplace, but it is — even in Ashland," said Brandon Goldman, senior planner with the city.

The city used federal community development block grant funds to pay for the study, he said. The research was needed because the city's documents on housing impediments hadn't been updated since 1996, Goldman said.

As part of the study, the Fair Housing Council sent employees to inquire separately about housing listed for rent. Afterward, the testers compared notes.

"Some were told the property was no longer for rent, but then another person would come and it would still be for rent," said Goldman.

Sometimes the discrimination was more subtle, as when the landlords gave certain testers a better tour or more information about the rentals, he said.

"A lot of people, especially those with mother-in-law units in their backyard, have the assumption that they can rent it to someone they like," Goldman said. "But they have to rent it to the first qualified person."

D.L. Richardson, chairman of Southern Oregon University's communication department, said he wasn't surprised by the findings.

"I've had students who clearly have said they thought they were being discriminated against," he said.

Richardson, who is black, said he hasn't personally experienced racial discrimination when searching for housing in Ashland.

"Since I've been here, I've always been treated fairly," he said. "What I've gathered as a whole has always been positive."

The high number of rentals maintained by homeowners instead of property management companies in Ashland could contribute to the rate of discrimination, Richardson said.

"People's prejudices can come into play more because so many more people are renting out the units themselves," he said.

The council completed 33 housing discrimination tests, focusing seven each on disabilities, familial status and sexual orientation. Three tests were focused on national origin and nine on race.

"We were really surprised at the different treatment of people based on race," said Moloy Good, the housing council's executive director. "It was really eye-opening and troubling."

No discrimination was detected based on national origin or sexual orientation, according to the study.

Although the study's sample size was small, the results are useful, Goldman said.

"The sample size is so small that it's not statistically significant, but it does at least show that there are instances of discrimination occurring," he said. "It may be anecdotal, but it is useful in showing that there are individuals out

MAYOR STROMBERG VOICES OUTRAGE AT RESULTS OF STUDY, CALLS FOR ACTION

City officials are working to address the high rate of racial discrimination cited in a housing study, Mayor John Stromberg said Wednesday.

"The things that were reported in that study are absolutely terrible and they are not something that should be happening in a community anywhere — especially in Ashland," he said. "So we have to do something about that."

The Fair Housing Council of Oregon found that six of nine Ashland landlords expressed racial bias when showing a rental to a black tester.

The city provides rental applicants with information on fair housing and tenant rights. It also supports a number of nonprofit and government groups that work to decrease housing discrimination, according to a release.

City officials are working to establish a rental registry to better gather data and maintain accurate information on housing trends, track population shifts and housing demands, and identify trends that may reflect illegal activities.

The city also is planning to update its Fair Housing Ordinance to bring it up to state and federal standards by including further protections for people with disabilities and information on how to make a housing complaint, according to the release.

It was unclear why the results of the study were not announced to the public sooner, Stromberg said.

"I really don't know," he said, "but we can't have the Housing Commission and the staff working on it and spending city money on it and be trying to hide it."

As news of the study broke Wednesday, city officials were inundated with comments and questions, said City Administrator Martha Bennett.

"I think most people are outraged that this would still be going on in 2010," she said. "That's kind of the feeling — that as a society we should be past this."

there that are being discriminated against on a daily basis.'

The Fair Housing Council completed a similar study in Beaverton and found an even higher racial bias there, according to The Oregonian.

Landlords who don't comply with fair housing laws can face administrative law hearings, private lawsuits and U.S. Department of Justice investigations, Good said.

"Through education and outreach, my hope is we would reach more potential victims and they would come forward to complain," he said.

Hannah Guzik is a reporter for the Ashland Daily Tidings. Reach her at 482-3456 ext. 226 or hguzik@dailytidings.com.

City officials are encouraging people who feel they have been discriminated against while seeking housing to contact Linda Reed, the city's housing program specialist, at 541-552-2043 or the Fair Housing Council at 800-424-3247.