



OregonLive.com

Everything Oregon

Test sample shows racial bias in housing in Beaverton and Ashland

By **Nikole Hannah-Jones, The Oregonian**

April 13, 2010, 9:33PM

To check whether renters face housing discrimination, the **Fair Housing Council of Oregon** sent black and white testers with the same credentials into Beaverton and Ashland to look at apartments advertised in newspapers and online. The results they found in just one month alarmed them.

Two-thirds of the black testers faced discrimination in Ashland and 78 percent in Beaverton.

That was far more than any other category -- discrimination based on family status, disability, sexual orientation and national origin. Those tests all came in at 50 percent or less in both cities.

The council was so stunned by the results that it intends to replicate the testing in the Portland area and other parts of the state, said Moley Good, executive director of the nonprofit agency, which helps enforce federal, state and local laws prohibiting housing discrimination.

"We were shocked," Good said. "Doing this every day, we know discrimination is higher than what the average person might think. We expected maybe 50 percent but not close to 80."

Though the sample size was small -- the city performed fewer than 50 tests in each city and nine in each that dealt specifically with discrimination against African Americans -- Good said it's valid. "I don't think we can go out and say 78 percent of African American renters are going to experience discrimination, but this number of tests is enough to demonstrate whether or not the average person of that protected class is encountering problems."

Among the discrimination black testers faced: They were told apartments made available to white testers were unavailable for them, they were quoted higher rents or deposits, were shown less desirable units or not told about specials.

The housing council usually only tests in response to direct complaints and hadn't gone into a jurisdiction for an extended period to do random testing of the rental market until last year.

The audits tell a much different story than the complaint lines -- only about 15 percent to 20 percent of complaints come from people reporting racial discrimination.

The Fair Housing Act -- 42 years old this month -- prohibits housing discrimination based on race (defined as black or white), national origin or religion, sex, family status and disability. In Oregon, the protection includes sexual orientation and gender identity, marital status, source of income, honorably discharged veterans/military status and domestic violence victims.

Diane Hess, the agency's education director, said people shirk the law with a subtle racism and many people don't realize they've been treated differently.

"If I am an apartment manager and am very nice and say, 'Oh, sorry, it was just rented,' most people never know," Hess said. "That's why testing is so important. We feel this is just the tip of the iceberg."

The agency began the testing after a federal lawsuit against Westchester County in New York alleged the county had taken more than \$50 million in federal housing and

Coming up

What: "Housing Discrimination and Segregation: What Happened in History and How It Still Affects Us Today"

When: 8:30 a.m. bus tour of Portland's "Hidden History of Discrimination" and noon lunch program featuring a discussion of present-day housing discrimination and a talk by Kevin Boyle, author of "Art of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age." The book won the National Book Award for nonfiction and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Registration: Registration for the bus tour is closed. Registration for the lunch closes April 19.

Cost: \$30 for the luncheon. Student and senior discounts available.
More information: Fair Housing Council of Oregon at 503-223-8197, ext. 108, e-mail information@fhco.org, www.fhco.org

community development money but had falsely certified that it had used the money to further fair housing. Last year, Westchester County agreed to a settlement using \$60 million of its own money to develop housing in white communities and institute desegregation policies.

The settlement gave the housing act new teeth. Before the settlement, counties and cities faced little oversight of fair housing efforts when receiving federal money

Oregon and its larger cities and counties will get about \$39 million from the federal community development block grants this year. Portland will receive about \$11 million of that, Gresham nearly \$1 million and Multnomah County about \$332,000. Beaverton, Hillsboro and Washington County will get about \$3.6 million combined.

So when the Westchester case surfaced, municipalities in Oregon and nationwide took notice.

Andrea Lindberg, Beaverton's federal community development grant coordinator, said Beaverton had started working more aggressively with the fair housing council before the Westchester lawsuit settled and asked for the testing.

But Lindberg said the testing sample was too small to be statistically significant. The housing agency conducted 47 tests there in a month, but Beaverton has about 18,500 rental units, she said.

Beaverton will do more testing, she said, and will work with Washington County to draft a plan for dealing with barriers to fair housing as part of its federal grant renewal process.

Brandon Goldman, senior planner for the city of Ashland, said Ashland hadn't done a fair housing analysis since 1996 and, in the 13 years since, had received only 21 complaints. "That is bordering on ludicrous, especially when you find six in one day," Goldman said.

The city will adopt parts of a plan developed by the Fair Housing Council. It will hire a local fair housing officer, train testers and collect data from landlords on applicants and tenants.

The housing council is going to encourage other cities and counties to undertake similar testing and will likely do a combined study for Multnomah County, Gresham and Portland sometime next year, Good said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we found similar results," Good said. "We are definitely not post-racial yet."

-- **Nikole Hannah-Jones**

© 2010 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.