

Star-Telegram

Nonprofit group reports bias among North Texas apartment managers

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BY SCOTT NISHIMURA

snishimura@star-telegram.com

DALLAS -- North Texas apartment managers often discriminate illegally against blacks, Hispanics and people with families in rental practices, even in subtle ways such as steering families away from parts of their properties, a report says.

The report by the nonprofit North Texas Fair Housing Center says secret shoppers who visited roughly 40 Metroplex apartment properties this year encountered differences in rents, apartment availability, security deposits, and move-in specials offered to whites, blacks, Hispanics and families.

The sampling is statistically insignificant "for research purposes," but the anecdotes are telling, said Shanna Smith, CEO of the National Fair Housing Alliance in Washington, a consortium that includes the North Texas group.

"African-American and Latino testers are being told things are not available, or are being charged higher amounts," said Smith, who joined the North Texas group at a news conference in Dallas. "The [federal] Fair Housing Act is crystal-clear on this."

Frances Espinosa, executive director of the North Texas group, which was launched in July, said the center might lodge administrative complaints based on some of the incidents with the Department of Housing and Urban Development or "seek assistance from private attorneys."

Espinosa said the North Texas group sent pairs of secret shoppers to the apartment properties between January and March. The testers recorded their observations after they left.

Among the incidents that involved discrimination against blacks and Hispanics:

55 percent, differences in offered rents

64 percent, differences in quoted information about availability of units

27 percent, differences in quoted security deposits

36 percent, differences in offered move-in specials

18 percent, differences in "treatment" during the visits.

Sometimes testers experienced subtle differences in how they were treated, the report indicated. An apartment manager might have spent more time with a white prospect than a black one, the authors said.

The report's authors made several recommendations, including collaboration between the industry and fair housing groups to train agents. "Some housing providers actually conduct self-testing to identify problems and correct behavior so complaints are not filed," the report said.

John Mitchell, executive director of the Apartment Association of Tarrant County, said he couldn't comment on the specific findings of the report without examining it more closely. The association conducts fair housing training programs annually, he said.

"There is a great deal of training that the vast majority of property managers put their managers through," he said.

Smith attributed the problems partly to turnover among property managers.

Thirty of the 40 properties tested for the report showed race or national origin discrimination, largely against blacks, and 10 showed discrimination by familial status.

More than half -- 26 -- were in Tarrant County, including Fort Worth, Bedford, Keller, Grapevine, Arlington, North Richland Hills, Grand Prairie and Colleyville.

In coming up with its list of properties to test, the group focused on predominantly white neighborhoods, where a good number of large, multifamily properties are "clustered in Tarrant County," Espinosa said.

The group focused its tests on family makeup on gentrifying neighborhoods experiencing an influx of single professionals.

In running the tests and pairing the secret shoppers, who typically visited the same properties within an hour of each other, the group controlled for factors such as age, appearance, the size of apartments sought, and profile factors such as length of employment, Espinosa said.

The North Texas group was launched with HUD funding sought by the National Fair Housing Alliance.

Scott Nishimura,

817-390-7808

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