



HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES MADE EQUAL

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For Release – May 15, 2002

21st CENTURY - Rental Housing is Still a Black and White Issue

BLACKS FACE DISCRIMINATION 44% OF THE TIME IN ROANOKE RENTAL MARKET WHILE MANY ILLEGAL BARRIERS CONTINUE FOR THOSE WITH DISABILITIES IN ROANOKE, LYNCHBURG, CHARLOTTESVILLE AND FREDERICKSBURG

Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc., (HOME) a non-profit fair housing and housing counseling agency headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, today released the results of a study which evaluated the barriers to housing for African-Americans in the Roanoke rental market and for people with disabilities in Roanoke, Lynchburg, Charlottesville and Fredericksburg. According to HOME, African-Americans seeking apartments in the Roanoke area were treated less favorably than Caucasians 44% of the time. People who need accessible apartments also face difficulties: 87% of multi-family apartments opened after March of 1991 in the four cities do not meet federal and state accessibility requirements.

HOME used matched pair testing, a controlled investigative procedure in which two individuals are sent separately to inquire about a housing unit, to evaluate the treatment that African-Americans are likely to receive. Differences in treatment included:

- Both testers made appointments to see an apartment and showed up at the scheduled time: when the black tester arrived the office was locked and no-one was there, when the white tester arrived she was met by the agent and shown the apartment;
- Both testers called to make an appointment. The white tester was invited to visit the complex and meet with an agent on a certain date, but the black tester was told the office would be closed on that same day;
- Both black and white testers met with the same agent less than an hour apart. The white tester was told more units were available than the black tester, while the black tester was quoted a monthly rent that was \$20 more than that told the white tester, and the application fee and security deposit were double those told the white tester

According to Constance Chamberlin, President of HOME, these findings are consistent with studies done nationally by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which indicate that African-Americans can expect to receive less favorable treatment at least 50% of the time when they look for a place to rent.

“Housing is not simply shelter,” said Constance Chamberlin, President of HOME. “Where you live makes a big difference not only in your quality of life, but in the opportunities that will be available for both you and your children. When people are denied the housing of their choice, the effects can last for generations.”

Black testers received less favorable treatment than white testers in 44% of the tests. Both testers received similar treatment in 39% of the tests, and the white tester received less favorable treatment in 17% of the tests. The rate of differential treatment favoring the white tester in each jurisdiction was Roanoke City 32%, Salem 50%, Vinton 67% and Roanoke County 50%.

In matched pair testing, the individuals are matched in every relevant respect except for the characteristic being tested – in this case, race. Equally qualified individuals should receive similar treatment and information, and the information and behavior revealed in the tests can then be compared. Testing has been upheld by the courts (and is supported by Congress) as a way of determining the existence of housing discrimination. It is frequently the only way to

uncover unlawful treatment, since individuals who are given misleading or inaccurate information about the availability of rental units have no way of knowing that they have been treated any differently from anyone else.

According to HOME, people who need an accessible apartment also faced barriers in Roanoke, Lynchburg, Charlottesville and Fredericksburg: 87% of those apartments required by law to meet certain accessibility guidelines were not in compliance. 53% had major deficiencies, which would render it difficult if not impossible for someone in a wheelchair to live in the apartment or enjoy the full range of amenities for which they were being charged.

“The requirement that multi-family apartments be accessible to people with disabilities has been the law of the land for more than thirteen years, yet the level of non-compliance is shocking,” according to Ms. Chamberlin. “It is time to make sure that the needs of people with disabilities for accessible housing are met.”

Design problems that rendered apartments inaccessible were found both inside the apartment units and in the common areas. Interior deficiencies included doors too narrow for a wheelchair to pass through, environmental controls that were too high on the wall for someone in a wheelchair to reach; and bathrooms and kitchens that were not accessible because there was a lack of maneuvering space. An agent at one relatively new complex told the tester that they had no accessible units at all.

Exterior deficiencies, including public and common use areas, included steps to the entrance of an apartment, ramps that were too steep for someone in a wheelchair to use, no curb cuts, no access to mailboxes and trash dumpsters because they were fenced too closely to allow someone in a wheelchair to get close to them, lack of access to playgrounds because the sidewalk was too narrow, access to the swimming pool obstructed by steps, and laundry facilities too small to maneuver in.

HOME evaluated the apartment complexes against seven requirements set out in the fair housing laws:

- a building entrance wide enough for a wheelchair, accessible by a route without steps;
- accessible public and common use areas;
- doors that allow passage by a person in a wheelchair;
- an accessible route into and through the dwelling unit;
- light switches, thermostats, and other environmental controls in accessible locations;
- reinforcements in bathroom walls for later installation of grab bars; and
- kitchens and bathrooms that allow a wheelchair to maneuver about the space.

HOME is a private, non-profit fair housing organization formed in 1971, whose mission is to ensure equal opportunity in housing for all persons through counseling, education, and advocacy. HOME provides training and technical assistance to housing providers to encourage them to offer their properties on a non-discriminatory basis; provides free information, assistance, and counseling services to consumers on rental, landlord-tenant, homeownership and fair housing issues; and administers a variety of financial assistance programs for first time homebuyers and those in danger of eviction and foreclosure. HOME also assists local governments in evaluating fair housing issues and developing policies and procedures to eliminate barriers to equal opportunities in housing, and investigates allegations of housing-related discrimination. The work resulting in this audit was partially funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, through its Fair Housing Initiatives Program.

For further information about any of HOME's services, or for a copy of the report, please call 804-354-0641 or visit our website at www.phonehome.org and go to the press page. The full report will be available on May 15.

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