



HOUSING RIGHTS CENTER

WORKING FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY IN HOUSING

December 2020

Housing Rights **NEWS**

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HOUSING RIGHTS HOTLINE: 1-800-477-5977

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www.housingrightscenter.org



HOUSING RIGHTS NEWS



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**Facing eviction during
COVID-19?**

**Get free or low-cost help at
www.stayhousedla.org**



**Stay
Housed
L.A. County**

MESSAGE FROM HRC'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Chancela Al-Mansour, Executive Director



The past year has brought major changes to all of our lives. The landscape of fair housing also shifted dramatically this year, putting debates about the causes and even the existence of discrimination in the national spotlight.

In July, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) revoked the 2015 Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule, which required federal agencies and grantees to actively work to eliminate discrimination in housing and housing development. HUD Secretary Ben Carson also introduced a rule allowing emergency homeless shelters to refuse to serve transgender people in accordance with their gender identity. In October, the federal government limited disparate impact protections, which tackle rules and policies that appear neutral but have a discriminatory effect. Each of these changes alone had deep implications for fair housing in the U.S.—and together in such rapid succession, they truly rocked the world of advocacy and enforcement.

These challenges, however, also energized new advocacy and led to the creation of new partnerships serving the common goal of addressing the damage caused by injustice. The National Association of Realtors, Wells Fargo, and Bank of America submitted statements to HUD opposing the dismantling of the disparate impact rule. The leaders of the Mortgage Bankers Association and the Nation-

al Association of Realtors both acknowledged how entrenched systemic racism in industry and government created the decisively racialized gaps in wealth and homeownership we see today. This widespread acknowledgment of the devastating impact of redlining and other government led or -sanctioned policies on homelessness, health and COVID-19 impacts, and the vast wealth gap between Black/Latinx and white households is unprecedented. Without action, however, it will not be enough.

Unprecedented change has also come to the laws that protect tenants and landlords in issues of rent and eviction. When it became clear how deeply COVID-19 would affect the ability of many to pay rent, many local governments passed urgency eviction protections. In September, the state of California stepped in to pass AB 3088, establishing a clear pathway for tenants who could not pay all of their rent to stay housed while ensuring landlords could continue to rely on a stable income. This month, AB 15 was introduced in the State Legislature to extend these protections for many, which are currently slated to end January 31, 2021.

Amid these changes, this year HRC launched a number of critical new programs in partnership with the state of California, the City and County of Los Angeles, and a network of housing advocates across the region. In addition to new eviction defense and rental assistance programs, we are proud to be a partner in Stay Housed LA, an online resource hub where tenants can connect with services, information, and legal aid. HRC also received

funds from both the federal and state government to address discrimination in housing. Our Education and Outreach Initiative, funded by HUD, highlights sexual harassment in housing and other challenges faced by tenants during COVID-19 (*see p.2*). The California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) tasked HRC with investigating discrimination based on source of income throughout Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, with an emphasis on protecting the rights of Section 8 Voucher holders. We also launched a robust weekly lineup of online services, including housing rights workshops and clinic hours open for counseling appointments. And hundreds of individuals tuned into our webinars to learn about topics such as service animals, LGBTQ+ rights, sexual harassment, and the rights of families with children.

As 2020 comes to a close, we are reflecting on the lessons we have learned so that we can continue to serve those who need it most. No one knows what 2021 will bring, but we are looking ahead to see what further changes a new federal administration, led by President-elect Joe Biden and HUD Secretary appointee Marcia Fudge, may bring to the fight for fair housing.

In April 2021, HRC will host our annual Housing Rights Summit online to celebrate Fair Housing Month. We are looking forward to assessing the challenges of the past year and reevaluating our strategies for building the more just, compassionate world we all dream of. We hope to see you there after a happy and safe New Year. ◀

HRC COMBATS SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN HOUSING

Crystal Letona, FHIP Education & Outreach Coordinator

The ongoing pandemic has impacted many people's ability to pay rent on time. With housing insecurity on the rise, while the need to stay safe at home continues, it's more crucial than ever to combat sexual harassment and assault in housing.

Unfortunately, the problem of sexual harassment in housing hits close to home. At the start of 2020, the managers and owners of two apartment buildings in Los Angeles were sued by the United States Department of Justice for sexually harassing their female tenants—a violation of the federal Fair Housing Act. And in one recent complaint received by the Housing Rights Center, a property owner demanded sexual favors in exchange for continued housing in an attempt to take advantage of the tenant's inability to pay rent due to COVID-19.

Now, the Department of Housing and Urban Development has awarded HRC a one-year grant to provide fair housing education and outreach on sexual harassment and assault, as well as other critical issues facing tenants and landlords during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

HRC will continue its work to further fair housing choice by developing a comprehensive education and outreach program, including workshops for landlords and tenants, outreach to community organizations, and dissemination of educational materials in multiple languages. Our initiative will break down the types of sexual harassment prohibited by the federal Fair Housing Act, as well as California protections for survivors of domestic violence, the rights of tenants with disabilities, and updates regarding COVID-19 and local housing laws. HRC aims to inform more people, especially the most vulnerable renters—including immigrants, sex workers, single mothers, and women who are the head of their households—that sexual harassment is illegal, and that they can come to HRC for help.

Tenants who are being sexually harassed, or have general questions, can reach out to HRC to speak to a housing counselor. Organizations may also request workshops on this topic. To inquire further about these and other HRC services, please email outreach@housingrightscenter.org. ◀

Reporting Sexual Harassment

My landlord is threatening to evict me after I refused to have sex with him. Can he do this?

No. This is sexual harassment, and it's a form of illegal discrimination prohibited by the Fair Housing Act.

Victims have **one year** to file a complaint with a fair housing agency, like the Housing Rights Center, which can investigate the complaint at no cost to the tenant.

Victims have **two years** to file a private legal action.



This material is based on work supported by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under FHIP Grant FEOI #20041. Any opinion, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of HUD.

Sexual harassment is not welcome here.



Reach out to HRC to speak to a housing counselor today.

Housing Rights Hotline: 1(800) 477-5977
 TTY: 1(213) 201-0857
 Email: info@housingrightscenter.org

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SERVICE ANIMALS, SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND MORE: CATCH UP ON SPECIAL TOPICS IN FAIR HOUSING

View HRC's past presentations at www.housingrightscenter.org. Here are a few special topics you might want to see.

1: OCTOBER: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT & SERVICE ANIMALS

As a tenant, you have the right to make a reasonable accommodation request to live with an emotional support or service animal, even if you live in a pet-free building. The city you live in may have specific requirements on how many animals you can have and what kind of license you need.



2: DECEMBER: SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN HOUSING

Nobody should have to live in fear of unwanted sexual advances or comments in their home. Sexual harassment in housing is a form of illegal discrimination prohibited by the Fair Housing Act. Learn what to do if it happens to you.



3: EVERY WEEK: COVID-19 TENANT PROTECTIONS

Can't pay your rent? Got an eviction notice? Confused about the different "eviction moratoriums" you're always hearing about in the news? Every week, HRC shares the latest updates on COVID-19 housing issues and unpacks what they mean for you.



Looking for affordable housing?

PROJECT PLACE

RENTAL LISTINGS - DECEMBER 2020

PUBLISHED BY THE HOUSING RIGHTS CENTER

www.housingrightscenter.org/rental-listing

HOUSING RIGHTS CENTER FILES LAWSUIT TO DEFEND RIGHTS OF FAMILIES IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Scott Chang, Director of Litigation

The Housing Rights Center recently filed a lawsuit to aid the parents of two children, alleging discrimination based on familial status by their property owner and manager.

The Vencill family lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Playa Del Rey. After their children were born, the family wanted to move into a larger home. They tried to apply for a three-bedroom apartment in the same building, which was available for rent at the time.

However, the property manager, Jane, refused to give the family an application or even show them the available unit. She charged unlawful fees and ignored their communications. For the next 10 months, she did all this and more in an attempt to deny housing to the Vencills based on their familial status.

The Vencills first contacted HRC through our **Housing Rights Hotline**. After evaluating their complaint, HRC conducted an investigation using fair housing testing and found strong ev-

idence of persistent familial status discrimination. In our tests, the testers who inquired about the apartment with children were deterred from applying with false availability information or a higher rent, while the tester without children was given more favorable information. Actions like this are forms of illegal discrimination under state and federal law.

Discrimination based on familial status is illegal under both the federal Fair Housing Act and the California Fair Employment and Housing Act. House-

holds with minors are protected from differential treatment and other practices that would restrict their housing choice simply because they have children.

The Housing Rights Center continues to work to protect these rights, as well as all fair housing rights, for the residents of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. ◀

“Families with children must have equal access to housing opportunities.
All of society suffers when families and children are intentionally denied homes.”
-Chancela Al-Mansour, Executive Director

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS FREE WEEKLY WORKSHOPS



MONDAYS 1 PM • FACEBOOK

LIVE Housing Rights Q&A

Real questions from real people, answered live on Facebook every week. (All questions are anonymized.)

TUESDAYS 2 PM • ZOOM

Housing Rights Workshop (English)

Learn how you are protected from discrimination in housing.

JUEVES 2 PM • ZOOM

Taller de Derechos de Vivienda (Español)

Learn how you are protected from discrimination in housing.

FRIDAYS 2 PM • ZOOM

COVID-19 Updates for Tenants and Landlords

Get updates on the newest laws for tenants and landlords during the COVID-19 emergency.

Need help?



Housing Rights Hotline

Toll Free: 1-800-477-5977
TTY: 1-213-201-0867

Email: info@housingrightscenter.org
Appointments: www.housingrightscenter.org/help

HOUSING RIGHTS CENTER & MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY SERVICES DEFEND DISABLED TENANTS' RIGHTS

Claricza Ortiz, Outreach Coordinator

The Housing Rights Center and our partner, Mental Health Advocacy Services, filed a lawsuit to aid a tenant with disabilities who needs an assistance dog. Tenants with disabilities are entitled to many reasonable accommodations under federal and state fair housing laws, and denying those accommodations can be a form of discrimination on the basis of disability.

Megan lived for five years in an apartment owned and operated by the Masava Corporation. Megan has multiple severe disabilities that come with debilitating symptoms, making it difficult for her to function independently across a range of major life activities.

Megan tried many different treatment options, and eventually, her doctors prescribed an assistance animal. A trained medical assistance dog could mitigate Megan's symptoms and allow her to continue to live independently in her home.

Megan's building didn't allow pets, but federal law says that service animals must be an exception to no-pet policies as an accommodation for disabled tenants. HRC helped Megan request this accommodation from her landlord,

and her doctors provided several letters certifying her disabilities and her need for the accommodation. Yet Masava Corporation denied her request without offering to discuss any alternative accommodations—which is required by law.

Megan also told HRC that the company retaliated against her for asserting her fair housing rights. Because of her complaint, the company refused to allow Megan to replace a room-

the same sense of stability and self-sufficiency in the future."

Nearly 60 percent of all fair housing complaints received by the Department of Housing and Urban Development are from disabled tenants who have been denied reasonable accommodations. Of these, complaints involving assistance animals are some of the most common types received. And in 2019, a study conducted by the Louisiana Fair Housing Action Center found

that only one in five landlords would accept an emotional support animal—even though this is required by federal fair housing laws.

This case shows how important fair housing education is, and it serves as a reminder that landlords must comply with their obligations

to make reasonable accommodations and allow emotional support animals. If an accommodation requested by a tenant is truly not possible to grant, then the landlord must engage in a good-faith dialogue to offer alternative and ensure that disabled tenants receive the reasonable accommodations that they need. Unfortunately, when landlords don't know or don't comply with fair housing laws, it can mean displacing tenants with disabilities from their homes—just like Megan. ◀

Did you know that tenants with disabilities are entitled to reasonable accommodations and modifications in their homes?

Common requests include installing wheelchair ramps, allowing service animals, and delaying landlord entry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contact the Housing Rights Center for help making reasonable accommodation or modification requests.

mate who had moved out, even though they have a longstanding policy of allowing roommate replacement. Since she couldn't afford the rent on her own, Megan lost her housing—and with it, the ability to live independently.

"The experience was profoundly destabilizing," Megan said. "I worked hard to establish my independence and make a place for myself in Los Angeles. Now, at the age of 30, I am living with my parents again. I do not know when or how I will be able to return to Los Angeles, or whether I will be able to create

SAVE THE DATE

APRIL 2021



HOUSING RIGHTS CENTER

22nd Annual Housing Rights Summit

An open conversation on the state of fair housing and the fight for equality in our nation today.

SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE

Please contact outreach@housingrightscenter.org for sponsorship inquiries.