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August 12, 2019

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Two Philadelphia tenants file complaints against landlords who turned them away for using Housing Choice Vouchers

Two-thirds of Philadelphia landlords won't accept Housing Choice Vouchers, which is illegal source of income discrimination under City law

Philadelphia, PA – Two Housing Choice Voucher holders who were turned away in their housing search, Tomika Anglin and Willie Taylor, have filed complaints against five Philadelphia landlords and property management companies with the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations for discrimination based on their source of income. They are represented by the Public Interest Law Center and pro bono counsel.

Half of all Philadelphia renters—or 140,485 households—are rent-burdened, spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. Many of these families are severely cost-burdened, as 80,000 households pay more than half their income in rent. Housing Choice Vouchers, often referred to as “Section 8,” help low-income families navigate the increasingly expensive private rental market. However, here in Philadelphia, many landlords categorically reject tenants who use housing assistance—especially landlords in more affluent neighborhoods.

An August 2018 study from the Urban Institute found that 67 percent of landlords in Philadelphia refused to accept vouchers. The researchers contacted apartments listed for rents that matched what voucher holders typically pay. This rejection rate was even higher—83 percent—in neighborhoods with low poverty rates.

Even though the practice of refusing vouchers is widespread, it is prohibited in Philadelphia. The Fair Practices Ordinance, which forbids discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations, explicitly bars landlords from refusing to rent based on “any lawful source of income, [including]...housing assistance programs.” When City Council enacted that legislation, they found that discriminatory practices by landlords result in “overcrowded, segregated areas, under substandard, unsafe, unsanitary conditions.”

“The Housing Choice Voucher program is meant to help families navigate a private housing market that is increasingly unaffordable and inhospitable to them,” said George Donnelly, an attorney at the Public Interest Law Center who is representing the tenants. “The program is meant to help Philadelphians find and keep stable housing, but landlords undercut that purpose by continuing to turn voucher holders away in violation of the law.”

The Philadelphians who are affected by source of income discrimination are disproportionately African American. More than 80 percent of the more than 20,000 Philadelphia households who use Housing Choice Voucher are black, while black households make up only 40 percent of the total renter population in the city.

Willie Taylor is a black man with disabilities who uses a Housing Choice Voucher. He is seeking to move away from his current home because it is not accessible.

During his housing search, Mr. Taylor inquired about the availability of an accessible unit he saw listed for a price he could afford in Liberty Crossing, a development in Northeast Philadelphia. Though the property previously accepted Housing Choice Vouchers, a representative of Liberty Crossings told Mr. Taylor and his social worker that they no longer did so.

Mr. Taylor took Liberty Crossing off his list of places to live and kept searching. Mr. Taylor, after months of searching, is still looking for an accessible place to live that will accept his voucher.

“I was forced to choose a place that was not safe for my health the last time I searched for housing with my voucher,” Mr. Taylor said. “And now the same thing is happening. I can’t find an accessible, healthy place to live.”

Mr. Taylor filed his complaint against the property owner Liberty Crossings 2012 LP and property manager Chelsea Management.

Tomika Anglin is a housing choice voucher holder who had lived in the same house for more than 20 years until a rent increase made her unable to afford her home earlier this year. Ms. Anglin, who is black, looked for new housing in the months prior to her lease ending in April 2019.

“I was incredulous,” Ms. Anglin said. “Why would a property owner post on a website for Section 8 voucher holders but not accept vouchers? Renters are increasingly being pushed out of the neighborhoods where we’ve raised our children and any form of discrimination further worsens a bad situation. These complaints are a small sampling of a widespread problem with finding safe, clean housing in the city.”

During her search, Ms. Anglin inquired via text message about the availability of a unit owned by Ginark Investments & Management LP. She found the property listed online at gosection8.com—a website targeted to voucher holders. The Ginark agent’s first question was “are you section 8?” When Ms. Anglin confirmed that she used a voucher, the representative replied that Ginark was not accepting voucher holders.

Ms. Anglin filed complaints against two landlords and property management companies who turned her away during her housing search: Ginark Investments & Management LP and Allegiance Real Estate LLC. Between them, these companies own or manage at least 300 properties in Philadelphia. She also filed a complaint against the owner of a property managed by Allegiance Real Estate.

“The widespread refusal to take housing assistance keeps low-income renters concentrated in disadvantaged neighborhoods, disproportionately affects black families, and undercuts the point of the Housing Choice Voucher program.” Mr. Donnelly said. “And the practice is illegal under Philadelphia Law.”

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The Public Interest Law Center uses high-impact legal strategies to advance the civil, social, and economic rights of communities in the Philadelphia region facing discrimination, inequality, and poverty. We use litigation, community education, advocacy, and organizing to secure their access to fundamental resources and services in the areas of public education, housing, health care, employment, environmental justice and voting. For more information visit www.pubintl.org or follow on Twitter [@PubIntLawCtr](https://twitter.com/PubIntLawCtr)