

Fish pledges enforcement, education against housing discrimination

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

An audit of the city's fair housing practices completed nearly four months ago has recently set tongues wagging over what the city is going to do with the high rate of reported discrimination.

The audit by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon found that 32 out of 50 test interviews with landlords revealed different treatment for test applicants who were African-American or Latino. The audit was part of the city's work to prepare its Analysis of Impediments report mandated by the federal government. It was the first such audit the city has commissioned.

"When we got the results we were alarmed by the high incidence of discrimination, particularly among people of color," said City Commissioner Nick Fish, who heads up the Portland Housing Bureau. Fish said he and Portland Housing Bureau Executive Director Margaret Van Vliet are taking a

dual track approach to rectify the situation, which was first published by *The Oregonian*.

"We're going to be working with landlords and their associations and the advocacy community to do outreach and education," Fish said. "At the same time, we're going to do some targeted enforcement of the law."

Fish said that since the city received the audit back in February, he has been talking with various parties, including the Oregon Law Center and Attorney General John Kroger, about developing an approach to addressing the disparities. The violations exposed in the Fair Housing Council's audit were to state and federal laws, and enforcement is triggered through an essentially complaint driven process, according to Fish. Fair housing complaints are not processed through the city, he said.

However, Fish said he is talking with the attorney general about partnering with other forces, either through

administrative or with a lawsuit, to push enforcement on some egregious violators.

"There will be something tangible we can point to," Fish said.

The audit comprised 50 tests – 25 test tenants based in race (African-American renters with white), and 25 based on national origin (Latino compared to white). Of the race tests, 15 showed different treatment. Of the national origin tests, 17 showed different treatment and 6 were inconclusive. Among the disparities in treatment were African-Americans and Latinos being quoted higher move-in costs and higher rent, and additional costs that were not applied to white applicants.

Fish's father, Rep. Hamilton Fish, was a champion of the Fair Housing Act of 1988, which expanded protections to families with children and people with disabilities. It also expanded options for redress on grievances through private means.

What to do if you think you have been the victim of housing discrimination.

Federal law protects against discrimination in housing based upon race, color, national origin, religion, gender, familial status, and disability. Oregon law goes even further and protects against discrimination in housing based on marital status, source of income, sexual orientation including gender identity, honorably discharged veterans / military status, and domestic violence victims.

In addition to private legal action, there are several places you can file a complaint:

The Fair Housing Council of Oregon
Fair Housing Hotline at 1-800-424-3247 Ext. 2
information@FHCO.org

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
1-800-669-9777
Or fill out the online form at www.hud.gov

Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries
Civil Rights Division
971-673-0764
crdemail.boli@state.or.us

Oregon Law Center
Intake line: 1-800-672-4919

County, advocates rally around saving TANF families

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

It could be weeks before lawmakers in Salem settle on a budget for housing and employment assistance for impoverished Oregonians, but it will not be a quiet time for anyone with a stake in the future of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Advocates from the housing, hunger, employment, children and education lobbies, are involved in organizing the masses to compel the State Legislature to save TANF from the chopping block.

On May 5, Multnomah County Commissioners voted unanimously to oppose the reductions to TANF that would cut approximately 50 percent of the programs budget and create the shortest time limit for assistance in the nation.

"These cuts to TANF are not going to solve the budget problems in Salem, but it will have real and harmful effects on the children in our community," said County Commissioner Deborah Kafoury, who brought forward the resolution. "This issue is so deeply tied to the work that we do here in Multnomah County. Many of our programs, including our housing programs, work only because of the connection that we have with the state TANF dollars. And if this program is cut, these families will be at risk of hunger, homelessness and child welfare placements. All issues that directly affect the work that we do here"

TANF specifically serves families with children with incomes less than 40 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$7,300 per year for a family of three. The maximum a family can receive is \$506 a month for a family with four or more children, with a lifetime eligibility limit set at 60 months, in line with federal policy.

The reduction under Gov. John Kitzhaber's plan would reduce that to 18 months, the shortest known in any state in the country.

Nearly 20 percent of Oregon's children live in poverty, the resolution notes. Oregon's

Get involved

You can send letters to your legislator to support funding for TANF through these sites:

Partners for a Hunger Free Oregon
oregonhunger.org/TANF-Oregon

Street Roots
org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5474/
campaign.jsp?campaign_KEY=2592

TANF program currently provides cash assistance to 30,108 families, including 54,000 children, 8,353 of whom live in Multnomah County. Without the state benefits, these families are expected to more heavily rely on already stressed county programs.

Kafoury, who along with Commissioner Judy Shiprack have served in the State Legislature, said it was not an easy decision to bring this resolution forward. She said she understands the difficulty in having to cut budgets, at the state and county levels, but that these cuts "go beyond the pale."

Likewise, County Chair Jeff Cogen said he wouldn't normally criticize another government body's budget process, but that "this is such an egregious mistake that I think it's entirely appropriate for us to do so especially because the impact is so deep in Multnomah County," Cogen said. "Given the depth of these cuts and the pain that it will cause on the most vulnerable members of our community, people who are barely hanging on, it just seems like the wrong call."

Since 2007, TANF's caseload has increased nearly 60 percent – from 18,600 families to more than 30,000 today. The number of two-parent families on TANF increased 330 percent in the past two years. Approximately 95 percent of all families receiving TANF have no earnings.

Meanwhile, staffing at TANF has remained the same and is now considered 40 percent below capacity by the state Department of Human Services.

A diverse collection of groups have organized to defend TANF and thwart the proposed cuts, including Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, Children First for Oregon, Center for Intercultural Organizing, Oregon Food Bank, The Jewish Federation of Greater Portland and the Oregon Housing Alliance, among many others.

Jessica Chaney with Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon was

herself a past recipient of TANF in the early 1990s. After leaving the military, her marriage fell apart and she found herself the single parent of two small children, living with her disabled mother. Through TANF she secured training and received her bachelor's degree.

"This allowed me to have a career and not just another low-wage job," Chaney said. "I went off the program in 1995 and never went back, nor did I feel vulnerable like I might need it again."

Liesl Wendt is the executive director of 211Info, part of a nationwide network of call centers that help direct people in need to appropriate resources.

"What we hear every day is people who want to provide for their families, who want to be contributing members and who are struggling to do that," Wendt said. "People don't understand how stretched these resources are now. I can't fathom what will happen when you significantly increase the number of people seeking those services."

One of the people taking those calls at 211Info is Nickcolynn Nixon, who a year ago

was herself working with TANF, getting her GED and employment training while her children were in daycare. She's now full-time with 211. Nixon says she wouldn't be where she is now without TANF and the JOBS program. The cuts, she says, are "heartbreaking."

"Because I know there are others who need this program to better themselves," Nixon said. "When I hear them call (211), I think to myself, I've been there. I hear them becoming desperate."

The notion that TANF is a free ride doesn't wash with Nixon. The people she worked alongside in the program didn't want to be there, she said.

"They wanted jobs so they could take care of their children on their own and not have to depend on the program. They wanted to be more independent," Nixon said.

The budget for TANF now working its way through the committee process also would cut the employment and skills training component, the JOBS program, and would cut employment-related childcare.

Kafoury credited coverage in the media, including Street Roots, for keeping this issue before the public, and through which "we've been trying to mobilize citizens to let the governor and the Legislature know that these cuts are not OK."

Kafoury urged everyone at the meeting to contact their lawmakers and the governor to preserve the TANF program.

"Don't take it for granted that because these cuts are so awful they're not going to go through. There's a real chance that they will be taken."

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— LIESL WENDT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF 211INFO

CORRECTION

Street Roots strives for accuracy, but we're human. So we also strive to correct errors in our paper whenever possible. Please report any errors to our managing editor, Joanne Zuhl, at 503-228-5657, or write to streetrootsnews@gmail.com.

In the April 29 edition of Street Roots, the introduction to the interview with Jason Breedlove incorrectly stated that he was arrested for selling methamphetamines. He has no meth charges on his record.



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