

# Fish pledges reform to come to prevent housing discrimination

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STAFF WRITER

On Wednesday, May 18, Portland Housing Commissioner Nick Fish released the locations cited in a recent fair housing audit as testing positive for racial housing discrimination.

The announcement comes following an audit from the Fair Housing Council of Oregon commissioned by Fish's office. The report found that 32 out of 50 fair housing tests on Portland rental units showed evidence of discrimination against race and national origin.

"We (have) released the names of the landlords where there is a positive test," Fish said. "We have previously notified the landlords that they were subject to an audit, and there was a positive test."

Those landlords and management companies include major rental operations and about two dozen other companies doing business in Portland.

Fish said his office will be forwarding all the information on the Fair Housing audit to the civil rights division of the Bureau of Labor and Industries, the lead state agency for processing HUD fair housing complaints, for them to initiate enforcement action.

"I made a commitment to our community," Fish said. "First I expressed outrage at the results. Second, I said that we would pursue a comprehensive action plan that would include enforcement of the law. We are taking aggressive steps to hold landlords accountable for alleged violations of our fair housing law. In the weeks ahead, I will be announcing a bold plan to address discrimination in housing in our community. I will be the first housing commissioner who has framed housing discrimination as a bureau priority, and we intend to take a number of very strong steps to end bias in rental housing."

Fish would not go into details on the plan, saying that he preferred to release it as a complete package. "It will include many of the suggestions from key community stakeholders who have been working on this issue for about a year," Fish said he expects

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Nick Fish

to announce the plan around the week of June 6.

"We anticipate this will lead to enforcement actions against certain landlords, but this is going to be a multi-year struggle. There will be further testing. There will be changes in the law, and there will be other steps to take that we will not tolerate rental discrimination in rental housing."

Among those companies noted in the report is Tigard-based Regency Management Inc., which has two locations on the list of discriminatory sites. It includes Nob Hill Apartments in Northwest Irving, and Terwilliger Terrace on Southwest Barbour. In both cases, the African-American testers were told that move-in costs ranged between \$1,400 and \$2,100, compared to a Caucasian tester who was told move-in costs would be between \$720 and \$740.

However, Regency Management Inc. president John Winquist said managers are instructed not to give exact move-in costs because there are many variables that can determine the price, including the results of credit and background checks. Those checks are done by an independent company that is not informed of a person's race or national origin when they make a recommendation on the security deposit, Winquist said.

"That's an international place," Winquist said, talking about Nob Hill Apartments.

**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](http://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

"We have students from all over the world."

Nob Hill resident manager Daphne Koa, herself originally from Taiwan, said she normally tells people the security deposit could be one month to two months rent depend on the screening report. Additional costs could also include prorated rent depending on when in a month a person moves in.

Dennis Steinman is a leading attorney on fair housing issues in Oregon, and also represents the Fair Housing Council. Steinman says that regardless of whether the discrimination is based in ignorance or racism, it is considered intentional. "Each of us as citizens are presumed to know the law. We are presumed to know that you cannot have different standards for people of color vs. people who are white," Steinman said. "Ignorance is not a defense."

Cashauna Hill is the fair housing staff attorney for the Oregon Law Center and a member of the city's Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Committee.

When the Fair Housing Council's audit returned with a 67 percent rate of detected discrimination, many were surprised by the high numbers.

"I was not," Hill said. "Folks who are engaged and involved in this work, on some level, in various forms, we've heard these stories. So the experiences that I've heard shared certainly line up with these numbers, unfortunately."

Hill says the most common complaint the Oregon Law Center receives involves disability discrimination and a failure to accommodate, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is the bulk of discrimination that is occurring. It simply is one of the easiest violations for a tenant or potential renter to detect, Hill says. Whereas in cases of discrimination based on race or national origin, the victim doesn't have the benefit of comparing their experience to someone else.

Hill says the report, now that the information has come to light, will be good for Portland.

"I personally think that any time insidious discrimination comes to light, that is a good thing. Also, any time truth is spoken to the experience of marginalized people, any time people experiences with discrimination are brought to light and their stories are validated, I think that is a good thing."

"In doing this work with the Oregon Law Center and Legal Aid, we work with low income individuals, and that is a marginalized group in society and many times we deal with clients who have just been made to feel like no one is going to listen to them or no one is going to believe them. Often with our clientele their perspective has been delegitimized for years, and I think anytime that the stories that they have to tell are validated and shown to be true and backed up with data, I think that's a good thing."

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with urban renewal is to make sure that we help people and give them a hand up — that we're not giving away free money to programs or projects that would be funded anyway, without urban renewal. I think it's very important as a tool to help neighborhoods deal with the blight, and that's what we should be using it for. I'm all about that. But I know that there's a balancing act. I respect what business has to offer, but I want to help them create jobs. But at the same time I think we need to be very careful in how we craft those URAs so that we don't lose a lot of our tax dollars to help our schools and county.

*J.Z.: It's also intended that 30 percent of that URA revenue would be dedicated to affordable housing, such as those families who have since left your district, to be able to live and work in the neighborhood. And we have stretches of revitalized streets in urban areas with nice businesses but there are no longer people of color working in them. These are the summer jobs and the permanent jobs you're talking about. But now we have the mayor saying the 30 percent is measured citywide, not per district, freeing up money for the Convention Center, for example, rather than affordable housing.*

L.S.: I understand that it may be more difficult in some districts to get the 30 percent set-aside. In extreme cases that should be the exception not the rule. I think that urban renewal is an important tool, and we need to hold the businesses accountable, and by "we" I mean the government and the community and the leaders who are elected in this community to make sure that we hold folks accountable. ... And that's something that's on our priority list, to make sure they're doing what they need to do as aggressively as they need to do it, to make sure we have some

affordable housing opportunities and that we do have those really good-paying jobs. ... If at the end of the day, that all fails, I have a bully pulpit.

*J.Z.: What is the county doing right and what can it do better to serve families in need?*

L.S.: We've put a fair amount of money into rent assistance programs where we partner with Housing Authority of Portland and others through the SUN (Schools United Neighborhoods) system to make sure that families and children have rent assistance programs. Commissioner (Deborah) Kafoury has done work with JOIN to make sure that instead of putting folks in shelter, we give them rent assistance to give them a hand up instead of a handout, so that can stabilize their world so they can go out and get a job and their kids can have a stable place to stay so they can attend schools. I think we all have the same values on this floor. And I believe in putting our county dollars in our rent assistance program as part of our anti-poverty programs, for the SUN school systems, and for free and reduced lunch.

I think we could do a lot better in terms of economic development, even though we're not the Portland Development Commission or the state, we do get some funding, and with this new department that's put into the budget for economic development, we're going to try to partner with local agencies in creating jobs in this community. For me, my priorities are protecting our seniors, making sure we're investing our youth and to help create jobs, because at the end of the day, the more people have jobs in Multnomah County that gives less of a pool of people who need a safety net. I'd like to help people go to the next level.