

June 22, 2009

Media Statement

Discrimination alive and well in the private housing rental market

Stories of real estate agents and landlords who do not supply details of vacant properties to newly-arrived immigrants and Aboriginal people dominated submissions to the Equal Opportunity Commission's inquiry into discrimination in the private housing rental market.

Commissioner Henderson today launched a report on an inquiry into whether people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal people were being discriminated against on the basis of their race in the private housing rental market.

Ms Henderson said other submissions also told of agents who did not distribute tenancy applications to people from minority racial backgrounds at rental 'home opens'.

National databases of tenants, or blacklists, used by real estate agents to identify 'risky' tenants, are secretive, can permit illegal discrimination and it is difficult and costly for tenants to correct inaccurate entries about themselves.

"These are largely unregulated and there is very little information about their operation," the Commissioner said.

"There is little doubt that many potential tenants believe they are discriminated against," she said.

The inquiry also found that the private housing market was heavily weighted in favour of owners.

"In a competitive rental market, people from minority Ethnic backgrounds are even more vulnerable," Ms Henderson said.

The story of Fadro was one told to the inquiry which illustrates direct discrimination simply because of a person's ethnic background:

Fadro is a single mother from Somalia with five dependent children and had been given the address of a property that was for lease and went for a drive past the property that afternoon to see what it looked like. The owner happened to be at the rental property when she visited and asked about her interest. Having explained her situation, the owner was sympathetic and offered to go with her immediately to the real estate agent to sign the lease. The owner explained Fadro's situation to the agent and informed him that he wanted Fadro to sign a tenancy agreement for the rental property.

The property manager was apparently appalled and said she could find the owner 'an Australian family with only two children... she won't be a good tenant' and told him he was unwise to rent to Fadro. Fadro was shocked by what had just been said and expected the owner to say something in her defence, however he simply shook his head and apologised that he couldn't help her.

"In another submission to the inquiry an owner was told by an agent that 'if they didn't want dogs or Aboriginals' renting their house, that could be part of the conditions".

The report makes wide-ranging recommendations to redress the balance for tenants.

It is essential that the residential databases maintained by the real estate industry are fair and do not contain information which is inappropriate.

All those operating in the industry should be trained in equal opportunity law as a condition of their licenses.

"It is especially important that tenants, especially those recently arrived in Australia need support to understand the laws and practices of the tenancy contracts. They also need to be able to access the dispute resolution system," Ms Henderson said.

A full copy of the report and its recommendations is available at: www.eoc.wa.gov.au

**FOR ADDITIONAL COMMENT: Commissioner Yvonne Henderson
(08) 9216 3954 or mobile number 0409 880 544**

Level 2, 141 St Georges Terrace, Western Australia 6000 - Tel: (08) 9216 3900 - Fax: (08) 9216 3960
Email: eoc@eoc.wa.gov.au Website www.eoc.wa.gov.au

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