



New rental guidelines target discrimination

The Star

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"Adults only" rental ads, immigrants shoved into substandard apartments and single mothers turned down arbitrarily are just some of the discriminatory practices a new human rights policy spells out as illegal.

Housing is a human right, Ontario Human Rights Commissioner Barbara Hall said this morning as she introduced what she calls the first policy of its kind in Canada. Now, tenants and landlords alike in Ontario will have clear rules about their rights and obligations when it comes to rental housing.

The policy, released at a news conference at the downtown YMCA in Toronto, puts together two years of research into housing discrimination that involved hundreds of people and dozens of organizations in Toronto, Ottawa, Kitchener and Sudbury.

The study found that some tenants in Ontario face evictions after a long hospital stays, sexual harassment to keep apartments, racial discrimination and neighbourhoods that band together to keep out social housing.

Eid Ismail, who is blind, talked about being denied a unit by a landlord who insisted he had no ground-floor apartments available, even when Ismail said he had no problem getting to upper floors.

Vince Brescia, president of the Federation of Rental Housing Providers of Ontario, talked of his concern that accommodating people who are physically disabled could bankrupt small landlords. Hall said the policy is flexible enough to give them a recourse if they prove an elevator in a single four-storey building, for example, would be too expensive for a landlord.

Legal decisions and the Ontario Human Rights Code itself already lay out what constitutes discrimination in housing; this new policy focuses on rental housing specifically.

It states that tenants cannot be refused an apartment or harassed on the basis of:

- Race, colour or ethnic background
- Religious beliefs or practices
- Ancestry, including native descent
- Place of origin
- Citizenship, including refugee status
- Gender, including pregnancy or sexual orientation
- Family status
- Marital status, including having a same-sex partner
- Disability
- Age, including teens 16 and older who are no longer living with their parents
- Receiving public assistance.

For landlords, the policy spells out what they can and can't do in screening for tenants:

They can ask for rental history, credit references and do credit checks

They can ask for income information and use that together with other important income information

They can only use income information to decide if a person has enough money to cover the rent

They cannot use the "30 per cent rule" — whether rent is 30 per cent or less of the person's income — to turn down a tenant

They can ask for a guarantor to sign the lease, but only if all tenants are asked.

A United Nations report last year declared Canada was in the midst of a "national housing crisis." A patchwork of federal, provincial and municipal agreements govern affordable housing. Canada is the only major country in the world without a national housing strategy.

In Ontario, a family of four on welfare gets only \$544 a month for housing. In Toronto, the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment is almost twice that.

