



Proposed Code Amendment: Fair Housing Source of Income Protected Class Back-Up Documentation

Background

Two meetings were held to receive Stakeholder Input as directed by Council on April 17, 2014. The majority of the input came from the two primary stakeholder groups: landlords (property owners and managers), and tenants, many of whom identified as voucher holders. In addition, there were representatives from internal and external community groups (COA Community Development Commission, Ending Community Homelessness Coalition, HousingWorks, etc.).

Listed below is an Overview of the Stakeholder feedback.

Stakeholder Feedback – In Support

- Tenants who hold vouchers expressed substantial challenges and difficulties they experience when they try to locate apartments that will accept vouchers as a form of rental payment.
- Voucher holders prefer fair housing protections in the Code that are as broad as possible, allowing them the greatest housing choice possible.
- The Austin Tenants' Council opposed any deviation from existing coverage provisions presented to council, as this would only reduce the number of available units to voucher holders and perpetuate the existing housing availability issues.
- Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid (TRGLA) is in support of adding the protected class, but they drafted an alternative code amendment proposal that is more complex and detailed to ensure the greatest coverage possible, and limit landlord defenses. TRGLA presented their draft amendment at the first public meeting. After the staff amendment was drafted, TRGLA presented their draft again at the Community Development Commission (CDC) meeting, and CDC adopted a recommendation to Council endorsing some of the provisions in the TRGLA proposal.

Stakeholder Feedback – In Opposition

- Landlords generally opposed any protections and urged limited coverage of any added protections.
- Feedback from landlords included whether coverage should exempt small complexes or owners because of the presumed burden and cost of administering voucher programs.
 - Special Note - None of the landlords were able to quantify the additional cost with an actual dollar figure but rather stated that the added cost of doing business necessarily had to be passed on in the form of increased rents for everyone).

- The various standards proposed by the landlords included exemptions from coverage for buildings ranging from 5 or fewer units up to 50 or fewer units.
 - Special Note - Proposing coverage to begin at complexes with 50 or more units (or any coverage exemption different from current provisions) may be a tempting policy to exempt small landlords, but it does not take into account the very high occupancy rates currently in the rental market. Some estimates are that occupancy is currently at 95%, meaning that the added 80,000 units that would be available if coverage was limited to complexes with 50 or more would actually add only an approximate 4,000 vacant units to the stock of housing for voucher holders.
- Another consideration discussed for the purpose of establishing Source of Income coverage was to exempt older properties that may not be able to pass the structural inspection standards of the various voucher programs.
 - Special Note - Staff believes that this can be accomplished on a case-by-case basis if and when a complaint is filed, because voucher holders may accept that the landlord is not discriminating if his property fails an inspection that causes the landlord not to accept the voucher. The voucher holder in that situation may never file a complaint.
 - Special Note - Current coverage provisions in the Code vary between single-family and multi-family dwellings. An owner of one to three single-family homes is not covered, but an owner of four or more single-family dwellings is covered. All multi-family dwellings are covered, unless the owner occupies one of the units, but this exemption does not apply if the building has five or more dwelling units.
 - Special Note - All owners regardless of the number of units they own are prohibited from making discriminatory statements. Therefore, an otherwise exempt owner would be prohibited from an advertisement with the customary “No Section 8” statement.
- Landlords expressed concerns that adding Source of Income as a protected class would increase their risk, because voucher holders do not have assets that can be recovered in the event of lease default.
- Landlords also expressed concern that the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program (formerly “Section 8”) requires certain structural elements that are not present or feasible in many older properties. The HCV program also requires certain appliances to be provided by the landlord, something that many landlords do not currently provide.
- Some property owners expressed strong resistance to being compelled to sign the required contracts to participate in the HCV program and other voucher programs. One property owner said that he would sell his properties to avoid signing a contract with the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and another landlord said that he is in the process of selling his rental properties.
 - Special Note - The contract a landlord must sign to participate in the HCV program and receive payment is referred to as the Housing Assistance Payment, or “HAP,” contract. In Austin, landlords sign this contract with the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA), the local housing authority. Landlords

stated that the HAP contract prevents them from seeking recovery for tenants who break the lease. For example, one landlord stated that the HAP contract terminates if the family breaks up. The landlords generally stated that the lease terminates upon any condition that terminates the HAP contract. Under a conventional lease, the tenant would remain liable for the full amount due under the lease.

- The Austin Apartment Association (AAA) representative predicted three different cost effects of adding this protection:
 1. Increased rents to recover the costs of administration by landlords;
 2. Increased costs to the City of Austin to investigate new complaints that are not reimbursable under federal law and our agreement with HUD to investigate federal equivalent discrimination complaints; and
 3. The indirect cost of discouraging new development because of the adverse regulatory environment.
- The AAA representative suggested that the City should be willing to reimburse landlords who suffer losses as a result of accepting vouchers or the costs of delays that result from waiting for HACA to conduct inspections.
- The representative from the Austin Board of Realtors (ABOR) suggested that a voluntary program with tax credit incentives would be better than the mandatory program under consideration.
- An independent landlord stated that HACA formerly provided financial assistance for costs, and landlords used to beg for voucher holders. This same landlord stated his belief that the risk of lease default is actually lower for voucher holders, and he suggested coverage only for new owners who purchase a property after this amendment passes, effectively “grandfathering” all existing property owners.

Total Attendance Public Meeting June 4, 2014: 21

Speaking For:

Kathy Stark, Austin Tenants' Council
Ann Howard, ECHO
Rufus Jones, Citizen, Voucher Holder
Fred Fuchs, Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid (TRGLA)
Nelson Mock, TRGLA
Cameron Dorsey, Texas Dept. of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA)(Texas State Agency)
Mitchell Rappaport, Disability Advocate
Mandy DeMayo, Executive Director, HousingWorks Austin

Speaking Against:

Rachel Fischer, Austin Apartment Association (AAA)
Jim Lloyd, Landlord
Bob Thompson, Landlord & AAA Member

Speaking On (neither for or against but serving only as a resource):

Lisa Garcia, Housing Authority of the City of Austin

Total Attendance Public Meeting June 11, 2014: 25

Speaking For:

Karen Paup, Vice Chair, Austin Community Development Commission
Bob Kafka, Citizen, Disability Advocate
Heiwa Salovitz, Citizen, Disability Advocate
Kathy Stark, Austin Tenants' Council
Brian McGivern, Texas Civil Rights Project
Jennifer McPhail, Citizen, Disability Advocate
Nancy Crowther, City of Austin Pedestrian Advisory Council, Disability Advocate
Stephanie Thomas, Citizen, Disability Advocate

Speaking Against:

Bill Evans, Austin Board of Realtors (ABOR)
Andrei Lubomudrov, ABOR
Rachel Fischer, Austin Apartment Association (AAA)
Jim Lloyd, Landlord
Bob Thompson, Landlord & AAA Member

Speaking On:

Lisa Garcia, Housing Authority of the City of Austin

Austin Human Rights Commission Regular Meeting July 28, 2014

Speaking For:

Kathy Stark, Austin Tenants' Council
Jennifer McPhail, Citizen, Disability Advocate
Heiwa Salovitz, Citizen, Disability Advocate
Stuart Hersh, Consultant, Not For Profit Housing Providers
Jan Bezant, Citizen
Preston Petty, Citizen

Speaking Against:

Andrei Lubomudrov, ABOR
Rachel Fischer, Austin Apartment Association (AAA)
Bob Thompson, Landlord & AAA Member

Austin Community Development Commission Regular Meeting August 12, 2014

Speaking For:

Glen Moss, local Realtor

Stephanie Thomas, ADAPT & Accessible Housing Austin
Bob Kafka, ADAPT
Ann Howard, Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO)
Dennis Saenz, ADAPT
Dolores Carrillo, ADAPT
Albert Metz, ADAPT
Stuart Hersh, Consultant, Not For Profit Housing Providers
Jennifer McPhail, Citizen, Disability Advocate
Victor Macyra, ADAPT
Heiwa Salovitz, Citizen, Disability Advocate
Kathy Stark, Austin Tenants' Council
Fred Fuchs, Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid
Tanya Lavelle, Senior Manager of Advocacy, Community & Housing Services, Easter Seals
Central Texas
Mandy DeMayo, Executive Director, HousingWorks Austin

Speaking Against:

Bob Thompson, Landlord & AAA Member
Rachel Fischer, Austin Apartment Association (AAA)
Andrei Lubomudrov, ABOR

Speaking On:

Lisa Garcia, Housing Authority of the City of Austin

Other:

Gayle Humble (signed up but left before speaking)
Linda Thompson (donated time to Bob Thompson)
Gus Villegas, Austin Apartment Association (donated time to Rachel Fischer)

Austin Commission on Veterans Affairs Regular Meeting August 19, 2014

EEFHO briefed the board and answered questions. No citizens spoke. The board took no action.