Helping Carson Families Stay in Their Homes

When kids are forced to move during the school year, their education suffers. This is especially true for low-income families, who face the additional financial burdens associated with the move. A major Ohio research report, “Student Nomads: Mobility in Ohio Schools,” found that “student mobility verges on an epidemic in inner-city schools” and that “frequent school movers face a general downward trend in average test scores and passage rates.”

Statistics for the Cincinnati Public Schools showed this same link. The district has 15 schools with more than 50 percent of their students transferring during the school year. This means that more than half of those who start school in one place in the fall finish in another place come springtime.

As part of a new, two-year pilot program funded by The Greater Cincinnati Foundation, HOME will expand its tenant advocacy services into one school, Carson Elementary in Price Hill, to help families remain in their homes.

For six years, Tenant Advocate Nicole Kelch has worked with tri-state families to address problems so they don’t lose their housing. Through her efforts, 75 percent of the situations are resolved, so that a move is unnecessary. She helps tenants get units repaired, mediate neighbor disputes, and take the emotion out of communication between landlord and tenant. With this new program, Nicole will bring special attention to the families of Carson.

Low-income renters move for a variety of reason, including difficulty paying the rent and family changes. Often they are looking for better quality housing. As one tenant told HOME: “When I couldn’t stand the roaches and mice anymore, we moved. But then winter came and I realized the furnace in the new place barely worked and we were always cold, so I started looking again.” Often low-income renters do not have annual leases and can be given a 30-day notice to leave any time they have a disagreement with the landlord or can be given a 3-day notice if they are as much as one day late with the rent.

Nicole has begun meeting with personnel at Carson as well as representatives of Santa Maria and Price Hill Will about her work in the community. She has been working with Kathy Painter of FamiliesForward, who is resource coordinator at the school and is enthusiastic about this added opportunity to help Carson families.

Nicole will be sharing information with parents and encouraging them to contact her with their housing concerns. She’ll use her knowledge of the Ohio Landlord-Tenant Law as well as her strong mediation skills to help those parents and children no longer be “nomads.”
At the same time the nation was celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, a bill was introduced into the Ohio Senate that would effectively gut Ohio’s fair housing law. Among other regressive measures, SB 349 would lower the penalties for housing discrimination and damage the important safeguards provided by the Ohio Civil Rights Commission (OCRC). The bill would make Ohio’s law so different that it would no longer be “substantially equivalent” to the Federal Fair Housing Act. HOME and its clients would retain the option of filing Federal complaints, but Ohio would lose the approximately $1 million it receives from HUD for investigating fair housing complaints. And when a housing discrimination complaint is filed in Ohio, the landlord or real estate agent would be dealing with Federal investigators and Federal attorneys.

The bill was introduced by Senator Bill Seitz of Green Township. It is apparently a reaction to a much publicized fair housing case in northeast Ohio in which an attorney for a small landlord fought a routine fair housing complaint for years even though the evidence of a violation was clear. When a final decision was issued, the state and the local fair housing agency were awarded damages and attorney fees, which had grown over the years the landlord’s attorney had dragged out the case. Many small real estate investors felt this was unfair and that the costs should be borne by the government and taxpayers, not by the landlord who had discriminated.

While I can understand the frustration of people who don’t understand the process, the answer is not to dismantle the law, but to work harder to educate small investors about fair housing and the simple and efficient process used by the Ohio Civil Rights Commission to resolve complaints.

HOME is committed to providing fair housing education for housing providers; last year we conducted more than 60 classes for the real estate industry. We also are committed to resolving complaints without the need for expensive court costs. HOME is a partner with the Greater Cincinnati Real Estate Investors Association (REIA) and the Apartment Association in a housing mediation service that is used to resolve disputes quickly.

Going backwards on civil rights is not the answer. SB 349 is not good for anyone. It is not good for the real estate industry and it is not good for the state of Ohio.

**Recent HOME Cases**

**National Origin Discrimination**
A small business that assists international families who have children at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital called HOME about difficulties they were having getting housing for families from Saudi Arabia. They said a local apartment complex even fired two employees who were helping the families lease apartments. HOME assisted the business, the fired employees, and the families file fair housing complaints with HUD.

**Racial Discrimination**
HOME filed a fair housing complaint against a real estate agent who required African American customers to be pre-approved before showing them property, but did not have the same requirement for White customers. HOME tested the agent based on reports that she was rude to African American customers at an open house.

**Discrimination against Families**
A family with one child called HOME after being turned down for a two-bedroom apartment in Mt. Lookout because the owner didn’t want children. Testing confirmed the restriction and HOME helped the client file a formal fair housing complaint.

**Sexual Harassment in Housing**
HOME received a call from a Butler County case manager who was concerned about a client at a Hamilton apartment complex where the landlord was sexually harassing the female tenants. In talking with tenants at the complex, it became clear that the police needed to be involved. The Hamilton police have charged the landlord with sexual assault. The tenants are low income and some were previously homeless. They are threatened with eviction and are afraid of the landlord who is constantly at the property. In addition to criminal charges, HOME is helping the women file fair housing complaints.

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**Your Donation Makes a Difference**
As a private, non-profit agency, HOME funds its services from various sources. While we receive some funds from competitive government and charitable grants, we also depend on the donations of our supporters.

We encourage you to help us advocate for victims of housing discrimination, train housing providers about their responsibilities, and educate the general public about the ongoing need for these protections.

Become a member of our team by making your contribution through our website, [www.homecincy.org](http://www.homecincy.org), or by mailing a check or money order to:

**Housing Opportunities Made Equal**
2400 Reading Road, Suite 118
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

Thank you!
Fair Housing Education – Then and Now

When Education Director Deb Jetter started with HOME in 1978, the “face of discrimination was very blatant in all levels of the housing industry” – home sales and rentals, mortgage lending and property insurance. “Hate crimes against minorities also were a real problem.” Discriminatory actions usually are more subtle now, yet education remains critical to fighting for the rights of all people.

“Starting out, I basically lectured,” she said. “Through the years, I learned to be more interactive and challenging for adult learners. I try to make use of their experiences and wisdom to problem-solve and apply the fair housing laws and compliance to relevant situations they may have within their daily business practices. This requires participants to think through solutions to scenarios and exercises that are relevant whether they are service techs, leasing agents, or experienced Realtors.”

Jetter continually updates her classes and develops new curricula.

“Our new ‘Implicit Bias’ course spotlights how everyone makes presumptions based on first impressions,” she said. “We use a series of images of people and have students jot down their quick responses to them. Then we tell them a little more about each person and ask them to consider if these facts altered their impressions. They usually do.”

Although the class is less than a year old, it has become extremely popular and much appreciated, particularly by experienced Realtors.

Other popular courses emphasize the rights of those with disabilities. More discrimination complaints today, both here in Cincinnati and across the nation, involve actions that hurt people with disabilities and housing providers are struggling to understand their responsibilities. “The class always has lots of questions about reasonable accommodations,” according to Jetter.

“Housing providers today seem to value and embrace the importance of fair housing training, and they seek HOME for training,” Jetter said. “I have seen many housing providers become devoted fair housing advocates where once they were not that way at all. Partnerships and positive forms of communication have formed with HOME and local governments, Realtors, lenders and apartment associations.”

After more than 36 years, Jetter remains enthusiastic about promoting a fair and just society both professionally and personally. She spent 24 years in the U.S. Naval Reserve, where she served as a chaplain and rose to the rank of Captain. She was called to active duty during the first Gulf War and in New York after 9/11. She continues to provide counseling to military members and their families. Her compassion also reaches dozens of people through her church, homeless shelters, and outreach ministries to several prisons.

“I believe we each have an obligation to make life better on this planet, not just for ourselves, but for those around us,” she said. “I believe that all persons are significant and have purpose no matter what their walk in life or their physical, cultural or ethnic backgrounds.”

Schedule a Class
To learn more about the classes available through HOME, call Deb Jetter at 513-977-2629 or see a listing on our website at [www.homecincy.org](http://www.homecincy.org).

Don’t Just Wear the Shirt. LIVE IT! GIVE. ADVOCATE. VOLUNTEER.
Donate Now at [www.uwgc.org](http://www.uwgc.org).

United Way Agency Partner
Ask Nicole

Nicole Kelch is HOME’s tenant advocate. In addition to serving clients who call the office, she answers inquiries from the ‘Ask a Question’ form on HOME’s website: www.homecincy.org. HOME does not give legal advice, but does provide general information on Ohio landlord-tenant law and helps tenants understand their options.

Amanda: I went to sign a lease for a property that stated I was responsible for all repairs. Can a landlord do this?

Nicole: Under Ohio law, it is the duty of the landlord to keep a unit fit and habitable and to make repairs. Though it appears in the lease, it is contradictory to law, which would make it unenforceable. If the repairs were caused by a tenant’s damage, the landlord may pass the cost along to the tenant. However, the general act of making the repair is the landlord’s responsibility.

Ryan: I do not have a written lease with my landlord, but pay on a monthly basis. Can my landlord change the locks without notice if they want the apartment back?

Nicole: No. The law recognizes tenants even if they do not have a lease. Because you have a pattern of paying monthly, you are considered a month-to-month tenant. This means that if a landlord would want to make changes to your terms of residency or the amount of rent to be paid or simply wants you to vacate the property, a 30-day notice is required. If you remain on the property past the 30 days, the landlord still would have to go through the court eviction process, even without a lease.

Fair Housing Basics for Local Governments

When: Friday, September 26
9:00 a.m.—noon
Where: OKI, 720 Pete Rose Way, Suite 420, Cincinnati, Ohio
Instructor: Elizabeth Brown, J.D., Executive Director for HOME, 513-721-4663, ext. 2620
Who should attend? Municipal and county staff and elected officials whose responsibilities involve some aspect of housing (planning, zoning, inspections, community development, etc.)
Content: Basics of fair housing law, liability risks for governments, and fair housing requirements if accepting federal funds.
Cost: FREE, but pre-registration is required. E-mail name, title, organization, and phone number to: myra.calder@homecincy.org.