

March 20, 2023

Dear Committee on Housing, Neighborhood Development, and the Homeless:

Hi, my name is David Smith. Thank you for inviting me to share my story about how landlords have discriminated against me because I have autism and use a voucher.

I live in the neighborhood where I was born and raised in Northeast Philadelphia. I have autism, and I receive Social Security. Some people think that, because I'm high functioning, I should get a job. Well, I may be high functioning but I'm not the Good Doctor! I'm perfectly capable of living by myself but I just can't afford to do so on my limited income. This is why I need a Housing Choice Voucher to pay my rent. Without my voucher, I wouldn't be able to afford my apartment. I'm afraid that I would either end up warehoused in a group home or homeless on the streets.

I waited on the voucher waitlist for 12 years. Once I received my voucher in September 2022, I was excited. I was living with my mom, who is an elderly woman. I was looking forward to getting my own place. My mom is getting older, and it's important to her that I have a safe, affordable place where I can live when she can no longer support me. I was excited to move out and be independent, but I was also stressed about making sure that I found a place. Like I said, I knew that if I didn't find a place I could end up homeless or in a group home.

I began searching for housing in the Northeast. I wanted to find a place that was in the neighborhood close to my family, friends, and places that I'm familiar with. Because of my autism, stability is important to me. When I looked at the affordable housing apartment listings online, I didn't see any in the Northeast. I began to panic thinking I would have to leave behind everything that I'm familiar with.

My first heartbreak came when my mom thought she found an apartment in my neighborhood for me. The landlord told her that he accepted vouchers. We paid an application fee and underwent the credit check process. After we submitted our application, the landlord told us he was selling the apartment to turn it in a condo. But this was a lie. Since then, I've walked past the apartment and seen that he didn't sell it – he just didn't want to rent to me and used that as an excuse.

Then, in late October, I thought I found an apartment in my neighborhood again. The landlord told my mom that they would accept the voucher. I went to tour the apartment and submitted an application and went through the credit check process. I got my hopes up that I had finally found a place. This apartment was one of the only apartments in the Northeast that advertised that they took vouchers, so a lot of other people had applied. The landlord chose someone else. It was a nightmare to have my hopes crushed like that.

Overall, I spent six months looking for a landlord who would accept my voucher in my neighborhood. My mom and I called dozens of landlords to see if they accepted vouchers. We were told no dozens of times. I didn't even realize it was illegal for landlords to say they didn't accept vouchers because so many landlords were doing it. Being told “no” again and again was devastating for me and my family. It felt like landlords assumed I was a lazy, no-good person just because I had a housing voucher.

During the six months that I was searching for housing, I was really scared of my future. I would have panic attacks thinking that I would either end up living on the streets, living in an unsafe and unfamiliar neighborhood, or losing my freedom and being warehoused in a group home, I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't bathe. I became withdrawn and depressed. I had nightmares. I got in fights with my mom. I was scared that I might end up in a mental hospital because of how bad my mental health was.

Eventually, in January, I found a place to live. At first, my landlord said they would not accept applications from voucher holders. But after my lawyer from the Public Interest Law Center informed them of the law in Philadelphia, they accepted my voucher. Even though they originally didn't want me to live here, I get along well with the management of my building. I do my best to be a model tenant.

Since I've moved in, my mental health has been better. My physical health has been better. My mom and I have a better relationship. I don't fight with my family members. I have an appetite. I have a social life. And I have freedom.

I'm here today because I believe that housing is a human right. And I believe access to housing is a disability rights issue. I believe that all landlords should accept vouchers, especially from people with disabilities like me. Many people with disabilities are capable of taking care of ourselves and living independently, but we simply can't afford housing!

Please do what you can to ensure that no one else has to go through what I went through. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my story.

Respectfully,

David Smith