

Committee on Housing, Neighborhood Development, and the Homeless
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Public Comment

I am the mother of three adult children. In 1987 after the birth of my first child, I applied for Section 8, now known as Housing Choice Voucher. I lived at the mercy of others for many years. At one point, I had to send my 2 year-old daughter out of state to live with family because it was easier to find housing for one than for two. I was living in transitional housing in 1995 when my number came up. I found a property that would work for my family and a landlord willing to accept the voucher. The benefits of that stability can't be overstated. Whether I had no job, a piece of a job or was fully employed, I was always certain that we had a safe, warm and affordable place to lay our heads every night. Housing security allowed me to obtain a Bachelor's degree and a livable income. My children have gone their own ways but they know where home is.

My eligibility for Section 8 ended in 2020, but I have been in the same house since 1995. However, in February of 2019 that stability was threatened because my landlord did not want to renew my lease. I needed to find new housing in 60 days. The search was anxiety producing. I couldn't even find property owners who would respond to my inquiry because of the voucher. In these gentrifying years, being unhoused has become yet another crisis. There are many employed, typically functioning people who are unhoused or living precariously simply because they can't afford rent. I thought me and my teen daughter were going to be homeless. The search for housing is fraught with bias and discrimination: Black, young, # of children, unmarried... and then you add a Section 8 voucher and (we all know) your perception as a quality tenant drops into the toilet. So much so that we also know you better ask first. So, I call, I email, I text—Do you accept Section 8? No, sorry. Nope, and those were only the ones who responded. Typically, landlords don't respond. Little did I know it's illegal to refuse a prospective tenant based on holding a voucher (source of income discrimination). Thankfully, at the same time Charlene Samuels, Constituent Services Director extraordinaire worked with PHA to address my landlord's financial needs which allowed me to stay in my home.

Though my own situation had stabilized, I understood that many people struggle to find safe, affordable housing even with a voucher. I was connected with Public Interest Law Center to file a complaint with the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations because I had written evidence of two refusals based on holding a voucher. Unfortunately, that process was also less than ideal. I filed two complaints in August of 2019. The first complaint was dismissed even though the landlord texted that they didn't accept vouchers. Why wasn't that evidence enough? The second complaint languished until the commission eventually found probable cause to proceed 2 years after filing. But then it took another year to go through conciliation with the commission. The complaint was finally settled in June of 2022. Three years is too long especially when the evidence is in writing and the landlord admits to discrimination.

My situation was resolved. But what could have happened to me happens to people every day without much in the way of justice. Most people are living so insecurely that it only takes a

momentary glitch in the matrix to end up on the street. The rights of those who need housing assistance should be enforced as vigorously as laws against racial, gender identity, sexual orientation and religious discrimination are enforced. Please put in place policies that support tenants who are trying to enforce their rights before the PCHR. Landlords must comply with Philadelphia's law against source of income discrimination just like all the other protected classes.