

THE BASICS OF TENANT SCREENING 101

Why do most rental housing providers screen applicants before renting to them? The simple answer is to assess risk and to determine if renting to the individual/family makes good business sense. Property owners and managers have the right to determine if a prospective tenant is able to pay the rent based on their current income and to assess whether they have a history of timely rent payment. It's important to look at rental history to evaluate if the prospective tenant will maintain your property in a satisfactory manner and to determine if they have a history of rule violations or whether they have received complaints from neighbors for things such as noise disturbances. Some property owners/managers also choose to do criminal background checks. The important thing to remember is while screening is necessary to insure that you get qualified, responsible tenants who pay their rent on time, you must screen in a manner that is reasonable, consistent, and complies with fair housing laws.

The first step in the screening process is to have a clear, written, screening policy and make sure that all employees involved in the rental process are aware of and follow the policy consistently with all applicants. If you need assistance in policy development contact the government or private, non-profit fair housing enforcement agency in the jurisdiction where your property is located. Additionally, there are many web sites that offer information about fair housing laws. For example, www.kingcounty.gov/civilrights, offers an extensive fair housing section. If you use a tenant screening agency, make sure they are aware of your screening policy and that they follow the policy consistently. Assure that the agency is aware of and complies with fair housing laws.

While it is important that your screening policy is applied consistently, there may be some prospective tenants that require special consideration. Persons with disabilities may need reasonable accommodations and/or reasonable modifications to either go through the application/screening process or to make the property available to them. If you have a policy of not renting to individuals that have had a history of police activity at their residence, evaluating applicants that have been the victim of domestic violence in the same manner may be considered discriminatory. New immigrants to this country present challenging screening

issues. You may want to look at alternative methods/documents in determining whether they meet your screening criteria.

Regardless of what your screening policy is, make sure that prospective tenants are aware of your policy and the criteria that will be used in evaluating their application. Applicants should also be made aware of the cost and the timeframe of your screening process. Make your rental decisions in a fair, objective and consistent manner. Most importantly, communicate your decision to the applicant honestly and quickly. Remember, how you treat the applicant will be the determining factor in whether they perceive that they have been treated fairly.