



Seattle Office for Civil Rights

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Fair Chance Housing law opens a door to opportunity

Augustine Cita had a good union job, working for \$28 an hour as a marble mason. By the usual standards, he should have been a great candidate to rent an apartment.



But he could not get past the first interview.

“I put in applications at 10 to 12 places,” Augustine said. “Nobody would touch me. It was very stressful and very depressing, looking for a place to live.”

The reason? Augustine served time in 2006. Even after completing his sentence in 2013 and living without any legal issues since, he found that his past was standing in the way of his future.

Luckily, he eventually found a landlord who was willing to rent him a small apartment.

Starting this February 19, people like Augustine have a way to address unfair treatment in housing in Seattle. That’s the date when the new Fair Chance Housing law becomes active, banning landlords from unfairly denying applicants housing based on criminal history. Individuals will now be able file a complaint with the Seattle Office for Civil Rights.

The law also prohibits the use of advertising language that automatically or categorically excludes people with arrest records, conviction records, or criminal history.

The legislation capped a decade-long effort by community groups such as the Village of Hope and Sojourner Place (now Jubilee Women’s Center), and most recently the FARE Coalition, to address bias against people with a criminal history who are seeking to provide for themselves and their families.

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The impact of that bias is racially disproportionate:

- Approximately 30% (173,714) of Seattle residents over the age of 18 have an arrest or conviction record and 7%, or 43,428 people, have a felony record.
- In King County, African Americans are 6.8% of the overall population, but account for 36.3% of the King County jail population. Native Americans are 1.1%, but account for 2.4% of the King County jail population.
- Nearly half of all children in the U.S. have one parent with a criminal record. Many families must separate or face homelessness.

For Augustine, getting an apartment marked the beginning of a new, better stage in his life. Today, he is the Workforce Development Director at the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. He teaches reentry classes at the Monroe Correctional Facility. He and his wife Zakiya have also started FAZ (From A to Z), a company providing re-entry and job training programs for men leaving the prison system.

And that landlord who, unlike others, treated him with fairness and trust? When Augustine found a new, larger place to live 18 months later, she asked him if he knew any other people who had served time who would like to apply for the vacancy.

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