

## **HOPE Fair Housing Center Wheaton, IL**

### **What's in a Name?**

Or, 'Discrimination' by Any Other Name Would Still Be As Painful

Housing discrimination based on race not only occurs in face-to-face encounters or voice recognition over the telephone, but also through emails from housing providers. "What's in a Name" is an internet testing project of housing providers in DuPage County conducted by HOPE Fair Housing Center. The purpose of the testing project was to determine if persons would be denied housing or discouraged from the housing of their choice based solely on their first names. In other words, were home-seekers qualifications for housing prejudged positively or negatively based on their first names alone? The results were both striking and disturbing.

HOPE conducted matched-pair tests in DuPage County to see if people searching for housing were treated differently through emails over the internet. Two separate email accounts were set up on different sites to lessen suspicion. The first names of our "testers" were Tyrone who was given a Hotmail.com email address, and Neal who was given a Gmail.com email address. The names "Tyrone" and "Neal" were chosen based on a previous study that determined these two names are racially identifiable. A sample of Craigslist.com rental housing advertisements were chosen to test, and then emails were subsequently delivered to the housing providers.

Tyrone was the first to inquire about housing availability. Emails were sent to each advertiser asking for additional information about an apartment as well as confirmation of rental prices and security deposits. The last question asked was about the safety and security of the neighborhood in which the rental property was located. Approximately two hours after Tyrone's first email was sent, Neal began sending similar emails to the same housing providers. Again additional information was requested including rent, security deposit, amenities/utilities and finally safety and security of the neighborhood. Aside from requesting similar information the emails differed in both style and tone to again deter discovery of the testing.

After two days responses to the emails had ceased, and the information began to be analyzed. Almost immediately it was apparent that, in a majority of cases, preferential treatment was being shown to Neal much more often than to Tyrone. After further analysis what became most clear was the fact that information delivered to Neal was put together in a much more formal manner, and almost always with a friendly or professional tone. The most prominent difference in the correspondence was to which person the housing providers responded. Of all the emails that were sent out, only 42% responded to Tyrone while 62% responded to Neal. The emails from Tyrone were sent out first, and

followed two hours later by emails from Neal. If Neal was responded to we can conclude that the housing providers must have received the inquiry from Tyrone as well.

Aside from the obvious cases where Tyrone was simply disregarded in favor of a perceived white tester, many of the housing provider's who responded to both did so in different ways. For example one housing provider responded to Neal,

"Neal, We have two 2BR's from \$895 to \$950. plus utilities, very good area, excellent condition. Showing the unit today or tomorrow, thanks, John."

The same housing provider responded to Tyrone with simply,

"Yes units are available 900-950 (sic) plus utilities; showing today or tomorrow, John"

Not only is Neal treated much more friendly, but he is also told a lower possible rent of \$895 than the \$900 told to Tyrone. This pattern was seen throughout the emails from housing providers who responded to both requests for information. For Neal messages contained "Sir" or "Mr." along with other niceties such as "Hello," and "Good Afternoon," whereas when Tyrone actually received a response the information requested was delivered without any attempt to make him feel welcome or comfortable viewing or applying for a unit. In fact, in no instance did Tyrone receive more friendly or welcoming treatment from a housing provider than Neal.

From these tests we can conclude that, just as people screen their phone calls through voicemail to discriminate, they screen their emails and pick and choose who they believe would be good tenants initially based off of one's perceived race. People believe that they are immune to the Fair Housing laws when they advertise on the internet because they think no one will find out. It is only by comparing paired test results that these differences in treatment can be uncovered, and addressed through appropriate enforcement of fair housing laws. Discrimination over the internet has the same affect as slamming a door in the face of individuals and families searching for housing; it has just evolved along with 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology.

When housing discrimination steals someone's opportunity to rent the home of their choice those families lose more than a home. Those families lose hope. The testing shows when communicating with potential tenants about possible residency at a rental property, housing providers are likely to try and persuade a potential white tenant to view and apply for a unit, and dissuade or exclude an African-American from proceeding with the rental process. If this is the treatment that African-American Home Seekers in DuPage County can expect from a simple email inquiry, one can only imagine the implications if they attempted more personal contact. Everyone who lives in America is protected from discrimination in housing. Fair housing means you may freely choose a

place to live without regard to your race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or because you are disabled or have children in your family.

Fair housing testing is a controlled method, legally approved by the U.S. Supreme Court, for measuring and documenting variations in the quality, quantity and content of information and services offered or given to various home seekers by housing or housing service providers. In April of 2010 a study was published by Samantha Friedman, Gregory Squires and Chris Galvan entitled "Cybersegregation in Boston and Dallas: Is Neil a More Desirable Tenant than Tyrone or Jorge?" The study concentrated on the reactions of housing providers to requests for information about rental properties received through E-mail. It is this study that provided the inspiration for HOPE's "What's in a Name" testing project.

HOPE Fair Housing Center, established in 1968, is the oldest fair housing center in Illinois. HOPE seeks to end the hurt and devastation of housing discrimination and segregation because of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, and familial status, or any other characteristics protected under state or local laws.