

Remove barriers to housing for the people we serve

The Issue

Barriers to housing

People experiencing homelessness often face barriers when trying to find a home and a job. Due to the fact that the Twin Cities has record low vacancy rates and resulting exceptionally high demand, landlords more than ever are using background checks and rental screening services to eliminate potential renters. People with no rental history or poor rental histories are being screened out by landlords. Most landlords refuse to rent to anyone with a criminal record of any kind, even if the crime occurred decades ago. These criminal background checks not only apply on housing applications, but also when applying to higher education and for employment. These screenings allow the smallest of blemishes on a record to follow a tenant for years. This becomes a major housing barrier for individuals with an imperfect record. These screenings isolate individuals with past violations from society while also blocking them from attempting to reenter the community or better their lives.

Rental expungement is an option for people who are being held back from moving on in life because of their rental or criminal records. The expungement process allows citizens to petition to get their records hidden so potential employers or landlords no longer have access.

The Update

In May 2017, the Minneapolis City Council passed an ordinance that prohibits landlords in the future from discriminating against the holders of section 8 housing vouchers. Section 8 housing is a voucher system of the federal government, which allows qualified low income tenants to pay only 30% of their income on rent. Simply put, a Section 8 voucher serves as a bridge between what the tenant can afford and the cost of the rent, filling the gap between the two. The ordinance, which takes effect on May 1, 2018, requires landlords to give Section 8 users a fair chance during the application process. If a perspective tenant feels that they were discriminated against, they can seek damages through Minneapolis Department of Civil Rights.

As of 2014, all Minnesota employers, small and large, public and private must comply with the ban the box bill, meaning it is no longer legal for an employer to ask about a potential employee's criminal history on employment applications. Minnesotans are also able to have their records sealed two to five years after completing their sentences in cases of low level felonies, misdemeanors and juvenile delinquency.

The Impact

Many clients at Agate Housing and Services face challenges in finding affordable housing due to criminal records that are often a result of being homeless. People who are homeless are repeatedly cited for "livability" crimes, such as public intoxication/urination or loitering. Agate's clients' rental applications are often automatically "screened out" because of criminal records and poor rent histories.