



IREM® From the Front Lines Podcast

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Bonus Episode

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Fair Housing

Erin:

Welcome to another edition of From the Front Lines, where we discuss both the day-to-day, and one-of-a-kind issues facing real estate managers. In this special bonus episode of From the Front Lines, IREM's Senior Director of Government Affairs, Ted Thurn, talks to Toni Harris, CPM® and ARM®, about advancements made in fair housing, its challenges, and what members can do to support fair housing. Toni Harris serves on the IREM Board of Directors and is the Founder and CEO of K.A.T. Professional Development Services and SVP of Business Development with Riparian Capital Partners. Over to you, Ted.

Ted:

Thanks, Erin, and thanks for joining us this morning, Toni. As you know, April is Fair Housing Month, which celebrates the passage of the Fair Housing Act back in 1968. So as we commemorate Fair Housing Month, what does Fair Housing Month mean to you, and why is it still critical in today's housing market?

Toni:

Good morning, Ted. And first of all, thank you so much for having me to speak on this very important topic. Fair housing means providing equal access to housing opportunities, not just for one, but for everyone. And this is regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status, or even disability. I find that it's critical because housing, it's a fundamental need, and the foundation for personal growth. I mean you think about it, it's a fundamental need also for financial stability as well as community development. And when people are unfairly denied housing, it can perpetuate poverty as well as segregation. So ultimately it holds back an entire community.

Ted:

Thanks. In your experience, what are some of the misconceptions that people may have about fair housing and fair housing laws, I should say?

Toni:

Yeah, in my experience, one of the things that I've actually experienced was one common misconception is that fair housing laws that they only apply to rental housing, and that's not true. Fair housing laws, they actually cover all aspects of housing. You know, it includes sales, lending, insurance and even marketing. Another misconception, in my experience, is that these laws, they actually prevent landlords from setting any kind of criteria for tenants, that's your tenant screening. And in reality, landlords can set the criteria, but they still must be applied consistently and without discrimination.

Ted:

In your experience, what are some of the biggest barriers to achieving fair housing in your community or in other communities? What are some of those barriers that that you see in your practice?

Toni:

In my practice of multifamily housing and as well as single family rentals, some of the biggest barriers include a lack of education. There's a lack of education and awareness about fair housing rights. Lack of education regarding the economic disparities that actually limit their housing choices. And subtle discriminatory practices that can be hard to identify and address. These are those blind spots, if you will. But additionally, you know, having outdated zoning laws, for instance, and exclusionary policies that can contribute to the segregation and unequal access to housing unintentionally.

Ted:

So we've talked about misconceptions, some of the barriers, but let's talk a little bit about, can you share examples through your career of where fair housing practices have made a positive impact in your community and in your experience?

Toni:

Oh, I love this question. Absolutely. I've seen first-hand how fair housing training for landlords and property managers has improved rental practices. It contributed to reducing the bias in tenant selection. The tenant selection criteria is treated, you know, as a priority, and it's all due to a result of, if you will, that fair housing training for landlords and property managers. Additionally, community outreach programs, they also help educate tenants about their rights. And that they've empowered more people to advocate for themselves and secure stable housing. You have local apartment associations. You have community advocacy groups that also contribute to the education for tenants.

Ted:

You know, I hear a lot of common themes with your responses, Toni. A lot of education still that needs to happen with fair housing.

Toni:

Yes, absolutely.

Ted:

And with, you know, some of these challenges and through education, and we consistently still need to educate and advocate for fair housing, what are some of the common challenges faced by landlords and property managers when adhering to fair housing practices?

Toni:

Yeah, still quite a few challenges out there, but one that resonates with me, Ted, is that there is a one major challenge, and that is navigating those gray areas where standard business practices can inadvertently result in discrimination. This is where we have those blind spots. An example of this is criminal background checks, for instance, or income requirements. It can disproportionately affect certain groups if it's not applied carefully. Another challenge is balancing the need for tenant screening with the requirement to provide equal access to housing. Having some of those blind spots and tenant screening includes, or it looks like not doing things consistently, you know across

multifamily, for instance, just as just as an example. To be a little bit more specific where you go to one community to apply and that tenant screening looks quite different than another community where you would go to apply. So it's definitely all about balancing the need for consistent tenant screening with that requirement to provide equal access to housing.

Ted:

So yeah, just to follow up on that, it sounds like remaining consistent when applying these types of procedures?

Toni:

Yeah. Yes.

Ted:

Yeah. So with that being said, what are some of the most effective ways, and again, talking about education, what do you find as some of the most effective ways to educate tenants and landlords, property managers, about their rights and responsibilities under fair housing laws?

Toni:

Absolutely. Well, you know, Ted, I'm a huge advocate for education. It's a no brainer there for me, but by providing regular training sessions for landlords, property managers and real estate professionals alike, it's essential making sure that those resources are readily available, whether it's through a website, whether you host workshops or even creating partnerships with a local housing advocacy organization. That can also be very effective. I've actually found that to be extremely effective because there is a need, there's a desire, there's a want, if you will, to partner with landlords to make sure that these sessions can be held for some of their constituents. So also incorporating fair housing education. I love the fact that we do celebrate Fair Housing Month and it's a great way to shine a light on something that's so very important. But incorporating those fair housing education opportunities into the leasing process, that can assure everyone is aware of their rights and responsibilities, and this is where you would get your on-site teams, your property leaders, your managers, your senior managers, and whatever that looks like at any organization. This is where you really get them involved and bring to their attention, "Hey, listen, this is an opportunity to share with the prospect that we follow all fair housing laws across the board." So that's also a fantastic opportunity to do that.

Ted:

Fantastic. So again, a lot of education that I think is a great way to be impactful with fair housing practices. Just to wrap up with, of course, education is one of the key strategies. Are there any other tools or strategies from your experience as a property manager that you believe are really effective in addressing housing discrimination?

Toni:

Absolutely for sure. Technology, which is a hot topic for all of us in in this space today. Technology plays a huge role with promoting fair housing, you know, online training platforms, fair housing hotlines and having accessibility to documentation or documentation resources, if you will. That can actually make education more widespread and effective. And you also stand a better chance of creating that consistency and having the continuity at any organization. I'll go back to saying that the partnerships with local advocacy groups and even some government agencies that can also provide valuable support for both landlords and tenants. We've seen this with our, you know, local subsidy providers in the Baltimore area. We've seen some success with local subsidy providers in

the Pittsburgh region just to name a few. But ultimately, ongoing education and enforcement of regulations and community engagement, I find that that is the key. And you just sprinkle that with all of that technology that is accessible, useful for us today and that's what I really see as being most effective.

Ted:

You know Toni, thank you so much for joining us today to talk about a really important issue. I know we could really go on for another hour at least to talk about all these issues, but it's so great to have an expert like yourself to talk about this and give some strategies to our members about fair housing, which is such an important topic. Greatly appreciate you joining us to talk about this today, Toni.

Toni:

Absolutely. It's my pleasure, and thank you so much for having me.

Erin:

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