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Housing Discrimination Increases In Washtenaw County

By [JORGE AVELLAN \(/PEOPLE/JORGE-AVELLAN\)](/PEOPLE/JORGE-AVELLAN) • DEC 17, 2018



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(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wemu/files/styles/x_large/public/201812/center_1.jpg)

Sarah Tankson at her Ann Arbor apartment.

JORGE AVELLAN / 89.1 WEMU

Finding an apartment or house to rent is a difficult and stressful task in and of itself. Add discrimination to the mix, and it becomes a nightmare. 89.1 WEMU's Jorge Avellan visited an Ann Arbor woman who has lived that experience.

 Listen
5:20

Listen to the full story.



Sarah: "Hi."

Jorge: "Nice to meet you."

Sarah: "Nice to meet you, too."

With the help of a friend, Sarah Tankson slowly walks from her kitchen to a grey La-Z-Boy chair in her living room. The 52 year-old suffers from the neurological disorder dystonia (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dystonia/symptoms-causes/syc-20350480>) that causes involuntary muscle contractions. Her condition is so severe, she needs a ramp to get in and out of her apartment.

"When I first moved here, it was just a slanted staircase, and I knew that something wasn't right with this particular apartment."

Tankson refers to the entrance of her unit at Randolph Court Apartments (<https://www.apartments.com/randolph-court-apartments-ann-arbor-mi/405yjfh/>) in Ann Arbor. To make it easier to get around, Tankson asked the complex management if she could have a ramp built. And, she offered to pay for it herself. But, management refused. It was a request that is protected by federal fair housing laws.

Pam Kisch is Executive Director of the Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid-Michigan.

"The pastor at her church said that he would build the ramp. He was a licensed builder, and he was ready to go, and he got there and they said, 'Well, no. You don't have the right permit or you can't build it in this direction or you can't remove the bushes that are in the way.' So they put up enough barriers that she eventually decided that she needed an attorney. And we found Steve Tomkowiak, who was willing to file a suit on her behalf in federal court. And filing that lawsuit is what prompted the landlord to finally give her permission to build the ramp that she needed."

Kisch says, in Washtenaw County alone in fiscal year 2017-2018, 80 new cases of housing discrimination have been filed with her office. That's up from the 68 filed the previous fiscal year. She says 60% of those cases are based on race and, percentage-wise, is followed by physical disability.

"We don't know exactly. It could be that, given the current political climate, people are feeling freer to express their wishes to discriminate against others based on their race, national origin, and disability."

Back at her one-bedroom apartment, Tankson says, despite her disability, she has a great outlook on life. Because the affliction keeps her from working, she has taken up painting as a hobby. Over the years, she's worked all sorts of jobs, working in the custodial services, and as part of the kitchen staff at Eastern Michigan University (<http://www.emich.edu>). Tankson says she tries to always see the best in people, but it still surprises her how discriminatory some can be. She gets emotional just thinking about it.

"And people don't realize when you want to do so much, but the only thing that stops you from obtaining your ultimate goal is barriers. Trying to find housing, moving from place to place, trying to find good appliances, where your bills are cheaper...but disabled people pay more money just to get a little bit. And if it had not been for Fair Housing, sometimes I think I would have never known that I was being discriminated against because we don't look for that. We're sick, so we're just looking for someone to say, 'I'm going to help you,' knowing that they would be blessed just for the want to help somebody who they do not know."

We contacted Randolph Court Apartments for comment, but the manager said he was not at liberty to discuss the issue. We also reached out to Group Five Management who owns the complex but did not hear back from them.

It's not just race and disability that can create difficulties in locating housing. Pam Kisch from the Fair Housing Center says housing discrimination also occurs because of familial status. If you read an rental advertisement that uses phrases like, "perfect for empty nesters" or "ideal for graduate students," it's an indication the landlord may be breaking the law by trying to avoid renting to people with children.

"The only way to end housing discrimination is to take it out of the shadows. To report it, to let us investigate it."

With tears in her eyes, but confidence in her spirit and soul, Sarah Tankson has a message for those who may be going through a similar situation.

"When the whole world hates you, go inside of you because you are the temple. Go inside of yourself, and you pray for those people who are abusing you or destroying your strength, and you get that strength from within you, and fight for what you believe is right."

Since 1992, the Fair Housing Center has aided in the filing of over 85 lawsuits regarding housing discrimination in Southeast and Mid-Michigan and has won 95% of them.

If you need to reach the Fair Housing Center of Southeast and Mid-Michigan, visit their website (<https://www.fhcmichigan.org/>).

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