

2025

# FAIR HOUSING TESTING REPORT



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## INTRODUCTION

Fair Housing Management Consultants (“FHMC”) entered into a contract with the Northern Virginia Regional Commission on May 1, 2024 to provide testing services to Prince William County. The testing services are set forth in the Project Work Plan of the contract.

Sixty (60) rental tests were conducted in accordance with that contract at apartment complexes located in various zip codes in Prince William County. Oversight of the testing project was maintained by the staff of the Human Right Commission (“Staff”). Appendix A sets forth the testing sites. However, the test sites set forth in Appendix A are not listed in the actual order in which they were tested.

## THE COUNTY’S ROLE IN CHALLENGING HOUSING BIAS

The legal authority for a local government’s role in challenging discriminatory housing practices was established by the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Gladstone Realtors v. Village of Bellwood*, 441 U.S. 91 (1979). This decision affirmed that a local government has standing to challenge racially discriminatory housing practices under Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the Fair Housing Act.

## FAIR HOUSING TESTING

Tester corroboration has become an accepted investigative tool used by administrative agencies at all levels to enforce fair housing laws. In 1982, the United States Supreme Court stated that, under certain circumstances, testers have the right to sue under the federal Fair Housing Act. *Havens Realty Corp. v. Coleman*, 455 U.S. 363 (1982).

Testing is a method to determine whether or not a home seeker is treated differently in his or her search for housing. A person’s race, for example, would be an impermissible factor in denying an opportunity to rent an apartment. Testers in housing discrimination cases have been defined as “individuals who, without an intent to rent or purchase a home or apartment, pose as renters or purchasers for the purpose of collecting evidence of unlawful discriminatory housing practices.” *Havens Realty Corp. v. Coleman*, 455 U.S. 363, 373 (1982).

The experiences of testers are used to compare the treatment of one home seeker (protected class) to another (non-protected class). In this context, testing measures the difference in treatment afforded a home seeker as determined by the information and services provided by property management firms, rental agents, and others. The experiences of testers are used to compare the treatment of one home seeker (protected class) to another (non-protected class). In this context, testing measures the difference in treatment afforded a home seeker as determined by the information and services provided by property management firms, rental agents and others.

## FEDERAL, STATE AND COUNTY FAIR HOUSING LAWS .....

**The Federal Fair Housing Act** outlaws discrimination in renting or purchasing a home or financing a home mortgage based on race, color, religion, national origin and sex. The federal law was amended in 1988 to include familial status and handicap as protected classes.

**The Virginia Fair Housing Law** mirrors the federal law and contains the additional protected class of elderliness, sexual orientation, gender identity, source of funds and status as a veteran. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD") is authorized to review local and state fair housing laws to make a determination of whether these laws contain rights and remedies for alleged discriminatory housing practices that are substantially equivalent to those provided in the federal law. Once a local or state enforcement agency has been certified, HUD will refer complaints of housing discrimination to the certified agency for investigation and resolution. HUD has made a determination that the Virginia Fair Housing Law is substantially equivalent to the federal law.

**The Prince William County Fair Housing Ordinance** contains the additional protected classes of age and marital status. The County ordinance does not provide the same remedial relief as provided under both the federal and state Fair Housing Laws.

## LEGAL PRECEDENTS ESTABLISHING HOUSING BIAS .....

The courts have established two ways of proving housing discrimination. Discriminatory housing practices are defined below.

**Disparate (Unequal) Treatment** - Evidence of disparate treatment occurs when a housing provider treats home seekers differently, for example, on the basis of their race. Fair housing testing is designed to uncover disparate treatment. This is the most common evidence uncovered by fair housing testing.

**Adverse Impact** - Evidence of adverse impact occurs when housing providers have policies, practices or procedures that, for example, disproportionately limit the ability of protected class members to obtain housing. If the effect of such a policy, practice or procedure adversely impacts members of a protected class, it would violate the fair housing laws.



# DEVELOPMENT OF A COUNTY-WIDE TESTING EFFORT .....

**60 Rental Tests Were Conducted** at apartment complexes located in various zip codes in Prince William County.

**30 Tests Were Based on Race:** Black/White testers

**30 Tests Were Based on National Origin:** Hispanic/White testers

**Over 100 Units** at all apartment complexes tested.

**Aggregate of 23,680 Units** for all apartment complexes tested.

A master testing schedule was developed, a tester pool was established and training was undertaken on March 29, 2025. Testing began on April 7, 2025 and concluded on April 18, 2025. The testing results are discussed in Analysis section of this report.

## Testing Site and Characteristics Assignments

**The purpose of testing in Prince William County was to determine how Black and Hispanic testers were treated at apartment complexes located in the county.**

This is done by pairing two testers who are matched as equally as possible to each other except for the material factors of race and national origin. The characteristics that relate to the rental qualification processes were matched as closely as practical for each tester. This included matching, for example, the income, employment background and prior housing history of the testers.

It is important to minimize, as much as possible, variables that are extraneous to what is being tested (differences in treatment based on race and national origin). Generally, it is necessary for testers to assume characteristics other than their own. Testers are, in fact, playing a role during the test.

## The Site Visitation Assignment Form

Site Visitation Assignment Forms were developed for each of the 60 tests.

**This form indicates the type of housing that the tester is looking for (one-bedroom apartment and the move-in date for example). The form also indicates the tester characteristics that are required for the completion of the test, for example, income and prior housing history.**

Slightly superior qualifications were assigned to the protected class testers (Black and Hispanic testers) to assist in determining whether differences were the result of the tester's status as a member of a protected class. Personal characteristics, for example, the sex and marital status of the testers were also matched.

Also, all testers were instructed to inquire about rent specials when visiting the rental office. A rent special, for example, could range from a waiver of the security deposit to one month's free rent.

The testers were sent to the same apartment complex on the same day, usually one to two hours apart. Generally, the testers were instructed to have the protected class tester visit the rental office first followed thereafter by their teammate. The tester teams were assigned to express interest in renting the same type of apartment and move-in date. In the race and national origin tests, both members of the tester teams posed as being married with no children and stated that they were looking for a one-bedroom apartment for May 1, 2025.

## Tester Training

All testers were required to attend a training session. FHMC conducted a training session on March 29, 2025..

**Pretest training serves to enhance the credibility of the testing process and diminish the likelihood of deviation from controlled factors.**

Testers are oriented as to what is expected of them when conducting a test.

Tester training included instruction in the following areas:

- Brief discussion of federal, state and local fair housing laws;
- What testing is;
- Playing the role of a tester;
- Conducting the test; and
- The debriefing process.

These, of course, were not the only components of the training, but were critical to the process of preparing the testers.

The training also provided an opportunity to thoroughly familiarize the testers with all of the testing forms. The training also emphasized the importance of timeliness in the completion of the forms in order to insure the validity of the testing process.

## Debriefing Process

The testers were generally debriefed each day after completing their assigned tests by the contractor, FHMC.

**The debriefing interview is a mechanism to ensure that the testing experience is being reported accurately and objectively.**

During the debriefing interview FHMC carefully reviewed the Tester Report Form with each tester. Particular attention was given to the narrative portion of the form. Any corrections and additions to the report form are made by the testers during the debriefing session. Each member of the tester team was debriefed separately.

Debriefing each tester separately maintains the confidentiality and objectivity of the testing results.



## ANALYSIS OF TEST RESULTS .....

Each test was analyzed individually to ascertain if there were any differences in treatment accorded, for example, to the Hispanic and White members of the tester team. The tester teams were assembled based on the protected class sought to be tested along with a visibly matched team apparent to the housing provider upon meeting each team member. Because the nature of housing discrimination is often subtle, care was given to ensure that the matching tester teams looked to the provider as the same in every material way except for the protected-class status being tested, race and national origin.

Rather than categorizing one aspect of the test as showing a difference in treatment, the tests were analyzed as a whole to put the totality of treatment afforded to each tester in context. By doing so, the variables looked for would be clear and, if no variation in treatment existed, such conclusions would be equally clear.

It is important to note that, because the rental tests did not include having the testers complete a rental application or participate in the subsequent qualification process at any of the apartment complexes tested, the tests could only measure the initial contact the testers experienced in the leasing office. The tests were designed to measure differences in treatment based on the availability of a one-bedroom apartment unit requested by the testers and the corresponding treatment concerning the issue of availability received by the testers.

Thus, while this aspect of testing is critical in understanding how persons are treated at the initial stage of home seeking, it cannot tell the complete story of how individuals are processed and what their ultimate treatment will be. Notwithstanding, experience dictates that the initial contact with and treatment by a housing provider are often where most problems arise when it comes to housing bias. Thus, initial experiences in ascertaining availability remain important factors in determining if housing bias is practiced.

### Review of the Test Results

A review of the rental tests in the most recent battery of testing showed:

**There were no difference in treatment found in either the race or national origin tests.**

A review of the rental tests paints a picture of:

**A tight rental housing market which is consistent with local and National trends.**



Summary Review

The tests were structured to have each tester team request a one-bedroom apartment with a move-in date of May 1, 2025 when visiting the rental office.

<b>36 out of 60 Tests</b> conducted had no vacancies for the a move-in date of May 1, 2025.	<b>19 out of 60 Tests</b> Tester teams were told a one-bedroom apartment would be available after May 1, 2025.	<b>11 out of 60 Tests</b> Tester teams were told a one-bedroom apartment would be available on on June 1, 2025 or later (July and August).
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As previously noted, the testers were instructed to inquire about rent specials when visiting the rental office. The testing results still show that rent specials continued not to be offered to prospective tenants as often as in earlier testing cycles.

<b>48 out of 60 Tests</b> Tester teams were told there were no rent specials.
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In the twelve tests where rent specials were offered, four tests were directed to active military with a waiver of the application and amenity fees. Two tests offered a reduction of \$100 off the first month’s rent and two tests offered \$100 off each month’s rent if an apartment was rented by May 1st. One test offered a reduction of \$160 a month off every month of the lease term. Only three tests revealed a rent special that offered substantial reduced rent of \$1000 off the first month’s rent. In past testing cycles, these more generous types of rent specials were more common. The low number and type of rent specials offered to the tester teams in this testing cycle also appears to be consistent with a tight housing market.

**African Americans and Hispanics comprise approximately 45 percent of the Prince William County population. No other minority group approaches their demographics in the county.**

Therefore, testing these two major minority groups allows the County to extrapolate how 45 percent of its population would be treated under fair housing laws. We would undoubtedly test other protected classes if we had indications or had concerns brought to our attention about issues with other protected classes.

For the same reasons, testing housing complexes of more than 100 units gives two advantages:

- Vacancies are more likely to be available, particularly in tight housing markets.
- In a complex of 100 units or more, it could easily be extrapolated that members of these two protected classes residing in these apartment complexes would be treated similarly to the testers.

In this case, the aggregate number of units in all complexes was 23,680.

Fair housing testing has two significant objectives:

- The enforcement of fair housing laws.
- Preventing discrimination.

Knowing that Prince William County tests regularly keeps landlords focused on compliance and the importance of training their employees about fair housing laws to avoid non-compliance issues.

Fair housing testing has its limitations. It only tests how a tester is treated by rental agents when seeking a particular size apartment for a specific date. Testers can not sign rental contracts or applications. The test is limited to the interactions between rental agents and testers.

The testing sites were randomly selected by zip code among the apartment complexes with more than 100 units. The consultant used a list submitted by the County's demographer. The list was updated and supplemented by an internet search of apartment complexes with over 100 units in Prince William County.

## Apartment Complexes Tested in Prince William County

(Sites are not listed in the order that they were tested.)

Apartment Complexes	Zip Code	Apartment Complexes	Zip Code
TGM Bull Run Apartments	20109	TGM Ridge Apartments	20109
Barrington Apartments	20109	Arcadia Run	20109
Soldier Ridge Apartments	20109	Abberly Avera Manassas	20109
Ravens Crest Apartments	20109	Sunnygate Village Apartments	20109
Westgate Apartments	20109	Masons Keep Apartments	20109
Ashton Glen Apartments	20109	TGM Sudley Crossing	20109
Somerset Point Apartments	20109	Woodburn Apartments	20109
The Regency	20109	Assembly Manassas	20109
Orchard Glen Apartments	20109	Marque @Heritage Hunt Apts.	20109
Coverstone I	20109	Sommerville Farms Town Apts.	20155
Amberton Apartments	20109	Orchard Bridge Apts.	20111
Coverstone IV	20109	The Elms @ Signal Hill Station Apts.	20111
The Fields of Manassas	20109	Maplewood Park Apartments	20111



This project was made in collaboration with the  
United States Department of Housing and Urban Development through the  
Prince William County Office of Housing and Community Development.



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