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# Equal housing opportunities becoming more common

## Fair Housing Act continues to gain ground after 40 years in existence

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PIERRE — The United States has come a long way in its quest for equality and civil rights in the past 40 years. That progress is due in part to the Fair Housing Act, which was signed into law April 11, 1968.

But there is still work to be done providing equal housing opportunities for all Americans — and nonprofit organizations, governmental entities and landlords are all doing their part to eliminate housing discrimination.

“It’s obviously a momentous occasion for us,” said Amy Nelson, executive director for Fair Housing of the Dakotas, a nonprofit organization serving North and South Dakota. “Although we certainly feel progress has been made in those 40 years, there still is a lot of significant work that remains to be done.” FHD helps to educate the public on fair housing laws and investigate allegations of housing discrimination. In South Dakota, the complaints FHD sees the most are from families with children and people with disabilities, Nelson said. Other complaints include discrimination based on race and gender.

The primary issues relating to discrimination against individuals with disability deal mainly with accessibility problems, said both Nelson and Chuck Quinn, director of public relations for OAHE Inc.

For people with physical disabilities, or those who must carry extra medical equipment with them, barrier-free housing is very helpful, Quinn explained. Ramps over stairs, roll-in showers instead of bathtubs that have to be stepped into, laundry facilities on the same floor as an apartment unit, and ground-floor housing can all sometimes be necessary for individuals in wheelchairs or who find it difficult to go up stairs.

Some individuals have also had difficulty with landlords who refuse reasonable modifications, such as allowing a person to have a service animal, Nelson said.

The passage of the American’s with Disabilities Act in 1990 helped ensure that those with disabilities or medical needs have opportunities for accessible housing options. Complexes built after 1990 must be constructed to ADA guidelines, Quinn said. Hallways, for example, must be wide enough for wheelchairs to make turns. Also, if homes built earlier than 18 years ago undergo any major remodeling, they must be made more accessible.

Many homes in Pierre are older than 18 years and sometimes don’t have the needed accessibility, Quinn said. But local landlords have been helpful in making adjustments for those with disabilities and other accessibility needs.

“We’re just thrilled with the landlords in our community,” Quinn said. “We’ve actually had people come to us if they have openings.”

A local builder, he said, recently requested barrier-free housing plans and hopes to design a complex solely for individuals with accessibility needs or developmental disabilities.

“That’s very exciting, when someone is willing to build that from the ground up for our people,” Quinn said.

Indeed, most agree the state has made several positive changes, due in part to the Fair Housing Act.

“Since I’ve joined the industry, in 20 years, the changes that have come about and the education that’s out there to help people be aware of their rights, I think we have come a long way,” said Vona Johnson, director of rental housing management with South Dakota Housing Development Authority.

Renters are now aware of whether something is discriminatory in the leasing process and know how to have that situation remedied, Johnson said.

“There’s really a high effort on educating people, both landlords and real estate professionals, about the proper way to handle transactions and I think people are consciously trying to do it right,” Johnson said.

### **Fact Box**

- The Fair Housing Act, part of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (including children under the age of 18 living with parents of legal custodians, pregnant women and people securing custody of children under the age of 18), and disability.
- South Dakota state law also prohibits discrimination on the basis of creed or ancestry.



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A ramp leads to the door of a Pierre home, providing increased accessibility for its occupants. Barrier-free housing such as this is one example of how far the nation and state have come in the 40 years since the passage of the Fair Housing Act.