

FORUM

Fair Housing investigates landlords

By Andrea Domaskin

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More Fargo-area women are telling a housing rights group that they've been sexually harassed by their landlords.

This year, Fair Housing of the Dakotas has filed or referred three sexual harassment complaints about one Fargo landlord to the North Dakota Labor Department. Fair Housing is looking into allegations involving two other area landlords, said Amy Schauer Nelson, executive director.

Normally, Fair Housing might investigate about one allegation a year statewide, she said.

The accusations range from sexual jokes to groping to the landlord demanding sex for rent, Nelson said.

"They (landlords) definitely prey on vulnerable women – single mothers, women coming out of shelters or younger women," Nelson said.

Most often, the first woman to contact her agency isn't the first to experience a problem with a particular landlord.

"There's typically been a pattern going back years and sometimes even decades," Nelson said.

Harassment claims

The three Fargo complaints filed with the Labor Department this year, which are still being investigated, involve one landlord who owns several houses converted into apartments in central Fargo. The Forum obtained copies through open records requests.

The landlord has not been charged with a crime. The Forum typically does not name individuals who have not been arrested or charged with a crime. Likewise, The Forum does not typically name victims of sex crimes, and these matters could end up in court.

The landlord's lawyer, Joel Fremstad, issued a denial Wednesday.

"We have responded to the Department of Labor and denied the allegations and believe that a thorough investigation will show that these claims are unfounded and that no housing or other laws have been violated," Fremstad said.

Fair Housing of the Dakotas filed the first complaint on June 19. It included summaries of interviews from three witnesses and 11 tenants, including one tenant who first contacted the organization in 2004 but decided not to file a complaint.

Another complaint was filed Aug. 14 by a woman who alleges that in November 2005, the landlord asked the woman to go hunting with him. He took her to a house in Lidgerwood, N.D., instead, brought a mattress from the back of the truck into the house, and then propositioned her, according to the woman's complaint.

The woman wrote that the landlord made comments about the rent she owed and said he could hold off on rent if she had sex with him.

"I was a far ways from home and felt if I did not go through with it he'd leave me there to walk home or evict me," she wrote.

She said she had sex.

The other complaint, filed June 29, came from a woman who said the landlord made comments and touched her in inappropriate ways and asked her out several times.

Once, she said she stayed in the bathroom for two hours while her landlord waited in the living room, saying he was hoping “to see a show.”

She contacted Fair Housing of the Dakotas in December after she received a mailing about housing discrimination.

The woman wrote she didn't realize what happened could be discrimination.

Cases not common

In North Dakota, housing discrimination complaints are filed with the state Department of Labor's Human Rights Division.

The department investigates the cases and works with both parties to settle the complaint.

If they can't come to an agreement, the agency will determine whether there is cause that discrimination exists. Then either party could move the case to district court or to an administrative hearing.

Fair Housing of the Dakotas, a nonprofit funded by government grants, is involved with many, but not all, complaints filed with the state agency.

The advocacy group educates people about housing discrimination, encourages public involvement and helps people enforce their rights. It deals with North and South Dakota.

So far this year, Fair Housing of the Dakotas has helped file 27 housing discrimination complaints in North Dakota, Nelson told Fargo's Human Relations Committee on Wednesday.

Of those complaints, 17 claimed discrimination due to disability, seven for national origin, race or color, five for familial status, and three for sexual harassment, a kind of gender discrimination. The remainder is a mix.

Nelson believes sexual harassment cases are underreported.

“The cases are tough because it's a very humiliating experience for women most often,” she said. “It's not easy to talk about.”

The women often don't have anywhere else to live, she said.

“Some of the cases involved women who may be just out of a shelter or maybe have a criminal history,” Nelson said. “They don't know where to go if they complain about this person. Where are they going to find other housing they can get into?”

At least two cases in recent years have landed in the court system.

In 1999, two women and the housing organization, known then as the North Dakota Fair Housing Council, filed a lawsuit against Bismarck landlord Virgil Woest, accusing him of discrimination based on gender and sexual harassment in housing.

They settled for an undisclosed amount of money on the first day of the trial in February 2001.

A case stemming from a 2003 complaint against a West Fargo landlord is set for a civil trial later this month, Nelson said.

Renter, landlord rights detailed in card

Fargoans can now read in several languages about their rights and responsibilities as renters and landlords.

The Fargo Human Relations Commission, as part of its Know Your Rights Initiative, is distributing reference cards with information for both renters and landlords.

Currently, cards are available in English, Bosnian, Somalian and Braille. The commission plans to translate them into Arabic,

Spanish, French and Vietnamese, commission member Yoke-Sim Gunaratne said Wednesday at a news conference.

There's a gap in services for mediating landlord-tenant issues, said Amy Schauer Nelson, executive director of Fair Housing of the Dakotas.

The grants that fund her organization are geared toward housing discrimination and not other problems, she said.

Cheryl Bergian, executive director of the North Dakota Human Rights Coalition, said she would like to take the program statewide.

The Know Your Rights Initiative is an effort to give community members direct access to their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

To request a card, contact the Fargo Planning Department at (701) 241-1474.

Readers can reach Forum reporter Andrea Domaskin at (701) 241-5556