



## TACOMA HOUSING AUTHORITY CHANGES CRIMINAL SCREENING POLICIES

***The policy changes will reduce THA's use of applicants' criminal history when determining eligibility for THA housing or rental assistance***

**TACOMA, WA - May 27, 2021**—On May 26<sup>th</sup>, the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) Board of Commissioners changed how THA uses criminal history when screening applicants for its housing programs. The changes will not eliminate but will reduce THA's use of applicants' criminal history. As HUD's rules mandate, THA will continue to deny admission to persons convicted of specified serious offenses and persons required to register as a sex offender. THA will otherwise reduce its use of criminal history for screening purposes.

Except for those HUD-required exclusions, THA will eliminate all categorical or automatic denials based upon criminal history. If an applicant for THA housing has a qualifying felony within two years of application review or if the applicant had been released from confinement within the previous one year, THA will conduct an individualized assessment of the applicant. For rental assistance applicants, except for HUD's required exclusions, THA will defer to the screening of its partner landlords. Presently, THA denies about 2% of its applicants because of criminal history – these changes will likely reduce that number.

"These changes reduce our use of criminal history to match what the research and experience tell us is its limited relevance to judging whether a person would be a good tenant," said Executive Director Michael Mirra. "These changes help to address the racial and social inequities that result from unjustified exclusions from housing. Everyone, including those of us with conviction histories, needs fair access to safe, affordable, and nice housing."

The policy changes come after a thorough review by THA's Department of Policy, Innovation and Evaluation (PIE). In 2017, THA accepted an invitation from the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) to participate in a new initiative, Opening Doors to Public Housing. This U.S Department of Justice-funded initiative sought to help public housing authorities assess how to increase access to housing for people with conviction histories while preserving a primary focus on keeping the housing safe.

THA's analysis included a review of the research literature, an investigation of the screening practices and outcomes of other public housing authorities, and a review of THA's current practices and outcomes. THA also consulted its tenants, its property management and service staff, the THA Landlord Advisory Group, and a full range of community partners and leaders.

THA's review found the following:

1. Criminal history has limited value in predicting future tenant behavior.
2. Criminal history, as a screening criterion, unnecessarily excludes persons who would be good tenants.
3. These exclusions perpetuate the racial inequities in the criminal justice system and extend them into the housing market.
4. Such unnecessary exclusions harm not only the applicant but also his or her family.
5. Safe, affordable, and high-quality housing, and family unification, can lead a person back to education, training, and employment, can make his or her re-offense less likely, and can make the community safer.

For these reasons, THA's new reduced use of criminal history as screening criteria can help make its housing programs more equitable, more just, and more accessible and make Tacoma safer.

"We would like to thank all residents, staff, landlords, and other community members who contributed to this review by submitting comments, feedback, and support," said Deputy Executive Director and Director of Policy, Innovation & Evaluation April Black. "We will continue to evaluate the impact of our policies, and we plan to share our findings so that other housing providers can consider similar policies that will reduce housing barriers for individuals with conviction histories."

#### *About Tacoma Housing Authority*

Established in 1940, Tacoma Housing Authority provides high-quality, stable and sustainable housing and supportive services to people in need. It does this in ways that help them prosper and help our communities develop equitably. THA develops and manages real estate and provides rental housing. In partnership with thousands of private landlords, it helps families pay the rent in the private rental market. It delivers supportive services to help families succeed as "tenants, parents, students, wage earners and builders of assets who can live without assistance." THA seeks to do its work in ways that help our community be an "attractive place to live, work, attend school, shop and play," and that help Tacoma be "safe, vibrant, prosperous, attractive and just." Learn more at [www.tacomahousing.net](http://www.tacomahousing.net)

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