

# AHMA NORTHWEST

*Affordable Housing Management Association (AHMA) Chapters of the National Affordable Housing Management Association (NAHMA) Representing the States of Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington*

*PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING OWNERS AND MANAGERS IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST*

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**AHMA NORTHWEST** is the premiere organization representing managers, owners, and professional service providers who are committed to maintaining excellence in affordable housing communities located in 4 Pacific Northwest states.

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## FEATURED ARTICLE:

### **Do You Know Who Your Residents Are? *Tips on Criminal Screening***

**By Mike Lapsley, president and CEO of RentGrow, Inc**

*RentGrow is a member of Idaho, Oregon and Washington chapters of AHMA Northwest!*

While the subject of "criminal screening" may sound cold or even offensive to some applicants, it's important to remember this: whether property owner or resident, we *all* want safe and peaceful places to live. In the multi-family industry, criminal screening has become one of the most important components in accomplishing this goal. Criminal screening protects your residents and your property. It's a key marketing point to let applicants know that they'll be living in a safe environment. And, in some cases, you may *need* to conduct criminal screening to comply with state and federal regulations.

However, this sort of screening--unlike credit checks--is still in its infancy. So how do you know if your criminal screening policy is effective, yet fair and consistent? Consider the following tips.

- 1. Carefully define your criminal criteria.** Determine what offenses are unacceptable. For example, you may identify specific types of misdemeanors, such as those that are violent towards people, or felony convictions within the last 5-10 years.
- 2. Educate yourself on discrimination laws.** Remember, look only at the records. Don't make assumptions based on things like a name or a personal characteristic that someone may or may not be a criminal. Consistency protects you, so treat all applicants equally. For example, you can't reject someone based on a criminal screening if you're not screening everyone. Make sure your policies are documented and that they fall within any federal, state, or county guidelines. (This website is a great resource: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/fheo/FHLaws/index.cfm>)
- 3. Verify that you have the right applicant.** You should always verify the applicant's identity *before* you even

begin the process of criminal screening (or credit checks). For example, say your applicant's name is Chris Smith. While your applicant might be female, the record that comes up might be for a male. Methods for verifying an applicant's identity include checking government-issued IDs, such as drivers' licenses, social security cards, or passports. Cross checking can also be valuable. It is important to be able to cross check references before you even see the records at your request as well as do an address search so you can learn about their identity instantly.

**4. Streamline the criminal screening process through a third party, such as RentGrow.** Set specifications with your screening partner to filter results based on your specific criteria. This helps take the burden off your leasing agents and lets them focus on the job they do best—attracting residents.

**5. Look beyond the data.** Choose a screening partner who can help you interpret results and whose service provides a recommendation to accept or decline the applicant.

**6. Keep in mind that for affordable properties, certain rules exist for resident selection:**

- Owners must develop and make public written selection policies.
- The plan must include any preferences in the admission of residents.
- The restriction or preference must cite the supporting documents to ensure nondiscrimination.

**7. If you handle the criminal screening process in-house, use consistent staffing and follow consistent procedures:**

- Limit access to staff who have been fully trained in order to eliminate inconsistencies.
- Provide written, step-by-step instructions for staff to ensure consistency.
- Use standard forms so that each applicant is subject to the same practices and will receive the same consideration.
- Use objective criteria.
- Follow a formal written process for collecting information. Owners should be careful about informal information "gossip" about an applicant. Such information is discriminatory and will affect applicants inconsistently, since the owner does not collect this for all applicants.

Remember, information collected from the criminal screening process enables property owners to make informed and objective decisions. An effective screening policy will also ensure fair, consistent, and equal treatment of applicants. Last, but certainly not least, criminal screening will help create a safe place for residents to live--and peace of mind for you.

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