



Mike Lapsley is president and CEO of RentGrow, Inc., the resident screening experts. www.rentgrow.com.


Know Who Your Residents Are Tips on Tenant Screening

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 property management 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 will 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. 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. Make sure your policies are documented and that they fall within any federal, state or county guidelines.
3. Verify that you have the right applicant. Always verify the applicant's identity before beginning the process of criminal screening (or credit checks). 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 requested records, 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. 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, and 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". Such information is discriminatory.

Remember, information collected from the criminal screening process enables property owners to make informed and objective decisions. An effective screening policy will also ensure 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. 

Visit www.hud.gov/offices/fheo/FHLaws/index.cfm for federal, state or county discrimination guidelines.