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Housing Search Tips

If you are having problems finding housing due to issues with your credit rating, criminal record, or rental history, here are some tips that may help:

- If your screening problem is related to a disability, you have the right to ask for a reasonable accommodation during the screening process.
- If you have a history of substance abuse, make sure you have completed a treatment program and/or are actively involved in support programs.
- Get free copies of your credit reports from the three credit-reporting agencies. Know what is on your report ahead of time so that you will be able to respond to negative or inaccurate charges that appear on it.
- Call your local Community Action Program. These agencies offer free trainings for tenants. The classes may be called “Tenant Education,” “Housing Readiness,” or “Rent Well” classes. Often landlords are more willing to accept tenants who have taken these classes.
- When you call to make an appointment to see an apartment, be polite over the phone. If you think your children will interrupt you, place your call from a different room, or have someone watch over them while you are on the phone. Don't disclose past problems over the phone to landlords.
- Arrive 15 minutes early to your appointment. Dress as if you were going to a job interview. Don't bring your children if they will misbehave. Explain to the landlord that you are looking for a long-term home.
- Ask the landlord for a tour of the apartment and all common areas of the building. Show the landlord that you care about the quality of your home by asking questions about the apartment and building. If you see things you like about the apartment, let the landlord know. If the apartment doesn't meet your expectations (if it is unsafe or if the landlord is rude to you), don't hesitate to look someplace else. Any problems you observe now will probably only get worse later.
- After the tour, if you decide this is a place where you could live, ask the landlord for their screening criteria. Tell the landlord about your past rental history. Explain briefly what happened in the past and explain why things are different now. Take responsibility for your mistakes.
- The landlord is required to give you a piece of paper detailing their screening process, what exactly they check, the cost of the screening fee, and how you can correct misinformation. The landlord is also required to tell you how many units are available, and how many applications have already been taken. Ask the landlord what he or she thinks your chances are of being accepted — if your chances are 50/50 or worse, ask if there is something else you could do that would help.

If the landlord seems unwilling to negotiate with you, it probably means that your application won't be accepted. In that case, don't pay the screening fee. On the other hand, if the landlord seems encouraging or tells you that other tenants with the same problems have been accepted before, submitting your application is probably worth the try.

