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Civil Rights Department Launches New Tool to Help Renters with Disabilities Exercise Housing Rights

Each year, state investigates hundreds of disability discrimination cases in housing

SACRAMENTO – The California Civil Rights Department (CRD) today launched a new letter generator to help renters with disabilities across California more effectively assert their fair housing rights to landlords. The new tool simplifies the process for asking landlords to make reasonable changes to their policies or physical modifications to rental properties to allow renters with disabilities to have equal access to housing. Each year, CRD investigates hundreds of disability discrimination cases in housing — by far the most common type of civil rights complaint in housing made to the state.

"Speaking up for your rights doesn't have to be complicated," **said CRD Director Kevin Kish.** "With our new letter generator, we're making it easier for Californians with disabilities to ask their landlords for the kinds of changes they are entitled to under the law. Knowing your rights is the first step to making sure your rights are respected. If you or someone you know needs help getting the accommodation process started, please check out our new online resource."

"Self-advocacy has always been at the heart of the disability rights movement, but it requires access to information and tools that disabled people are routinely denied," **said Michelle Uzeta, Esq., Executive Director at the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund.** "CRD's letter generator helps renters assert their rights from the very first request and creates a written record that matters if a housing provider fails to follow the law."

"I am excited about this new tool," **said Dara Schur, Senior Counsel at Disability Rights California.** "It will make it much easier for individuals with disabilities to get the changes they need from their landlords, as required by law, without the need for a lawyer."

"Fair housing rights mean little if people cannot exercise them," **said Christopher Brancart, a fair housing attorney.** "This new letter-writing tool helps tenants with disabilities clearly request the accommodations or modifications they need and helps housing providers understand and respond to those requests. Clear communication is essential to exercising these rights and complying with fair housing law. By making that process easier and more accessible, this tool will help prevent discrimination, promote compliance with fair housing laws, and make equal housing opportunity a reality for more people with disabilities."

Small Changes, Big Effects

Under California law, people with disabilities have the right to ask their landlord to make exceptions to rental policies or allow physical changes to their unit or common areas to make it possible for them to live at a property. Whether it is making an exception to a no-pets policy for an emotional support animal or letting someone install a grab bar to allow them to safely use the bathroom, these types of changes can make a major difference in people's lives and enable people with disabilities to have equal access to housing. In the housing rights context, changes to rental policies or rules are typically referred to as "reasonable accommodations" and physical changes to a property are referred to as "reasonable modifications."

State fair housing laws apply to most landlords and others involved in the rental or management process, including property managers, homeowners associations, real estate agents, and housing appraisers. Broadly speaking, these housing providers are required by law to quickly consider and respond to requests for reasonable accommodations or modifications. If landlords, property managers, or other housing providers are unable to immediately grant an accommodation or allow a modification, they must actively engage with the tenant to come up with potential alternative solutions to give the person an equal opportunity to use and enjoy their rental property. Failure to engage in this process in a timely manner is illegal housing discrimination.

Making It Easier to Make the Ask

While CRD provides numerous resources online to help people understand their rights and responsibilities under California's fair housing laws, it can still be hard for tenants to know how to effectively communicate their needs to landlords. The new tool launched today aims to help renters quickly draft customized letters for their specific requests. The tool does this by:

- Creating an easy-to-complete checklist of potential accommodations or modifications.
- Using easy-to-understand definitions to explain relevant legal terms.
- Sharing clear examples of what can count as an accommodation or modification.
- Incorporating clear rationales for the need for specific accommodations or modifications.
- Adding information on the relevant laws, regulations, and legal precedent.
- Including an option to go through the drafting process in the user's language of choice.

If you or someone you know has experienced housing discrimination, CRD may be able to assist you through its complaint process. The department also provides general information and factsheets online about civil rights protections, including on reasonable accommodations, reasonable modifications, and disability discrimination in housing.

You can check out the new tool and create your own letter on CRD's website.

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The California Civil Rights Department (CRD) is the state agency charged with enforcing California's civil rights laws. CRD's mission is to protect the people of California from unlawful discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and state-funded programs and activities, and from hate violence and human trafficking. For more information, visit calcivilrights.ca.gov.