

# RAAs 101:

## Practical Tips for Making Reasonable Accommodation Requests in Housing



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Mental Health Advocacy Services is a nonprofit legal aid organization whose mission is to protect and advance the legal rights of low-income adults and children with mental health disabilities and empower them to assert those rights in order to maximize autonomy, achieve equity, and secure the resources they need to thrive.

# ABOUT

- **Established in 1977** to meet the legal needs of adults and children with mental health disabilities
- **Serves all of L.A. County** with a physical office located in Koreatown
- **Primary areas of service include** public benefits, fair housing, employment barriers, homelessness prevention, and special education



# Fair Housing Law

- Federal Law - *Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988*
  - Prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability and family status.
- California Law - *Fair Employment and Housing Act*
  - In addition to the above, also prohibits discrimination based on marital status, ancestry, sexual orientation, gender-identity or expression, genetic information, source of income, and military or veteran status.
- California Law - *Unruh Civil Rights Act*
  - Prohibits discrimination in many types of housing based on citizenship, immigration status and primary language.
- Other federal and state laws

# Fair Housing in California

The law prohibits discrimination based on:

- Race (Includes hair style/texture)
- Religion
- National origin
- Color
- Sex
- Physical and mental disabilities
- Family status (includes children under 18 or pregnant)
- Age
- Ancestry
- Sexual orientation
- Source of income
- Genetic information
- Marital status
- Gender identity & expression
- Citizenship
- Immigration status
- Primary language
- Military or veteran status

# *Who* must follow fair housing laws?

Housing providers, including:

- ⦿ Landlords
- ⦿ Mobile home parks
- ⦿ Condo complexes and HOAs
- ⦿ Nursing homes/board and cares
- ⦿ Sober living homes
- ⦿ Transitional and interim housing providers
- ⦿ Homeless shelters
- ⦿ Master tenants/sublessors
- ⦿ Housing authorities

# In California, what is a disability under fair housing law?

- ⦿ A limitation on a major life activity – a disability makes a major life activity difficult
- ⦿ Mental, physical, and social activities are major life activities
- ⦿ Examples of major life activities: working, eating, breathing, walking, learning, communicating

# Is alcoholism or addiction to illegal drugs a disability?

- ⦿ Current alcoholism, past alcoholism and past drug addiction are disabilities
- ⦿ Current illegal drug use is **not a disability**
- ⦿ People who currently use illegal drugs may have an underlying physical and/or mental health disability, which *would* qualify them for reasonable accommodation

# “Disability” also includes...

- ⦿ Record or history of disability
  - Includes previously having a disability
- ⦿ Perceived disability
  - Includes people who are regarded as having a disability, even if they do not actually have a disability
- ⦿ Any family member’s disability

# What Does the “FAIR” in Fair Housing Mean?

***Race, color, religion, sex, gender & gender-related, national origin, family status, sexual orientation, ancestry, source of income, genetic information***

Everyone should be treated the same.

***Mental and physical disability***

People with disabilities should be treated the same, EXCEPT it may be necessary to make reasonable changes to rules to enable them to live in their housing.

# When Is a Landlord Unlawfully Discriminating?

- ◎ Some discrimination is intentional
  - “I don’t rent to people in wheelchairs.”
  - “We don’t want any weirdos here.”
- ◎ Sometimes, policies have a disparate impact on people with disabilities because they effectively make an opportunity less accessible to people with disabilities.
- ◎ **Denial of a reasonable accommodation can be unlawful discrimination.**

# What is a Reasonable Accommodation?

- ⦿ A change in the rules to help a person with a disability access housing or housing-related services
- ⦿ Examples:
  - Waiver of “no pet” rule for service or emotional support animal
  - Paying rent later in the month
  - Request to move to quieter or first floor unit
  - Reserved parking space
  - Extra time to cure lease violation

# What Makes an Accommodation Reasonable?

An accommodation is reasonable if it:

- ⦿ Is necessary due to the disability,
- ⦿ Provides the person with equal access to housing, AND
- ⦿ Is not an undue burden, fundamental alteration, or direct threat.

# When is an Accommodation Necessary?

- ⦿ An accommodation is necessary if there is a nexus between the accommodation requested and the limitations of the disability.
- ⦿ Nexus = connection between the request and the disability.

# When is an Accommodation an *Undue Burden* or *Fundamental Alteration*?

- ⦿ Undue Burden – The accommodation is too difficult or expensive.

Example: Landlord cannot expose tenants to fire hazard to accommodate hoarding.

- ⦿ Fundamental Alteration – The accommodation changes the nature of the program.

Example: Landlord cannot be expected to walk or feed emotional support animal.

# Direct Threat

- ⦿ Accommodations cannot be a direct threat to the health or safety of others OR result in substantial physical damage to property.
- ⦿ Landlords must make an individualized assessment of direct threat based on:
  - Nature, duration, severity of risk of injury;
  - Probability that injury will actually occur; and
  - Whether any reasonable accommodations can significantly reduce the threat.

# Reasonable Accommodation Request Process: Step 1

- ⦿ Request the Accommodation
- ⦿ Request can come from person with disability or their representative (family member, social worker, attorney)
- ⦿ Request can be made at any time during tenancy: During application, tenancy or eviction (and sometimes even after)

# Reasonable Accommodation Request Process: Step 1, Cont.

- ◎ Best Practices for RA Requests
  - Make request in writing (email or text is fine)
  - Keep a copy
  - Indicate that you have a disability (no need to include diagnosis)
  - Explain connection between the disability and accommodation requested
  - Use the words “reasonable accommodation”- Not necessary, but helpful

# Sample RA Request

(Date)

(Full Name of Landlord or Housing Provider)

(Landlord or Housing Provider Address)

**RE: Request for Reasonable Accommodation Due to Disability**

Dear (Name of Landlord or Housing Provider),

I have been a tenant at (Tenant Address) since (Date of Move-In). I write to request a reasonable accommodation as permitted under the Federal Fair Housing (42 U.S.C. §§ 3601-3619) and the California Fair Employment and Housing Act ("FEHA") (Ca Civil Code §§ 54, et seq).

Under the Fair Housing Act and California FEHA, a landlord is required to accommodate a tenant with a disability by changing or making an exception to a rule or policy, as long as the requested accommodation is reasonable and related to the disability. Additionally, a landlord cannot refuse to permit a tenant to make reasonable modifications of existing premises if such modifications may be necessary to afford the tenant equal opportunity to use and enjoy the dwelling.

I or a member of my household request that:

(Describe desired change in policy, such as paying rent later in the month when disability benefits are received)

This request is related to my or a member of my household's disability because:

(Describe how disability is related to request: NO NEED to include diagnoses)

Please respond to this request in writing within (Insert number of days) days. I can be contacted at (Tenant phone number or email address). I have kept a copy of this letter for my records. Thank you for your attention to this serious matter.

Sincerely,

(Tenant name)

(Tenant Address)

# Sample RA Request: Credit/Eviction

(Date)

(Full Name of Landlord or Housing Provider)

(Landlord or Housing Provider Address)

**Re: Request for Reasonable Accommodation**

Dear (Landlord or Housing Provider Name):

I am writing to request a reasonable accommodation due to my disabilities.

I am applying for housing at (Address of property applying to), and request that you consider factors beyond (my credit score and/or the eviction on my record) and accept me as tenant. Due to my disabilities, (Insert description of how credit issue or eviction is related to disability, such as need to pay for medical expenses, spending during disability-related mental health episode, or eviction based on disability-related issue).

Please consider other indications that I will be a suitable tenant, including the fact that (Insert description of other indications: For Example, applicant has a Section 8 voucher, is in mental health treatment, or is receiving case management and support from an organization).

Attached, please find letters of support from the following people: (If possible, list individuals such as former landlords, case managers etc. who can speak to fitness for tenancy and attach letters of support.

Under both federal and state fair housing laws, landlords are forbidden from discriminating against individuals with disabilities, and are required to provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that those individuals receive equal access to housing (29 U.S.C.S. § 794; 42 U.S.C.S. § 12132; 42 U.S.C.S. § 3604(f)(3)(B); Cal. Gov't Code § 12927(c)(1)).

Please respond to this request by (Date applicant wants response). I can be reached at (applicant phone number/email address).

Sincerely,

(Applicant Name)

(Applicant Address)

# Sample RA Request: Support Animal

(Date)

(Full Name of Landlord or Housing Provider)

(Landlord or Housing Provider Address)

**Re: Request for Reasonable Accommodation**

Dear (Landlord or Housing Provider Name):

I am writing to request a reasonable accommodation for an emotional support animal at (Address of property where emotional support animal would be kept). Under the Fair Housing Act and California FEHA, a landlord is required to accommodate a tenant with a disability by changing or making an exception to a rule or policy, as long as the requested accommodation is reasonable and related to the disability. People with assistance animals are entitled to request a reasonable accommodation to have the assistance animal in order to ensure that they have equal access to housing. 2 C.C.R. § 12185(c).

I require an emotional support animal due to my disabilities. (Describe type of animal already owned by applicant/tenant or that applicant/tenant wishes to get.) My emotional support animal provides comfort and support to me and assists me in managing the symptoms of my disability. My (doctor/psychiatrist/therapist/social worker/case manager) has deemed this accommodation necessary in light of my disability. Please see the attached letter from (doctor or professional's name). Please waive your no-pets policy and allow me to have my emotional support animal.

Please respond to this request in writing within (Insert Number of Days) days. I can be reached at (Applicant/Tenant phone number and/or email address). Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

(Applicant/Tenant Name)

(Applicant/Tenant Address)

# Reasonable Accommodation Request: Step 2 - The Interactive Process

- Housing provider *may not* deny request without engaging the tenant in dialogue
  - If the disability is not obvious or known to the landlord, landlord can ask for verification of disability
  - If the connection between the accommodation and the disability is not clear, landlord can request verification of disability-related need for accommodation (but *cannot* demand medical records or diagnoses)
  - If landlord thinks the request is unreasonable, they *must* invite discussion about alternative accommodations

# Who Can Verify Disability or Need for Reasonable Accommodation?

- ⦿ Depending on the individual's circumstances, information verifying that the person has a disability can usually be provided by the individual himself or herself.
  - Example: SSI/SSDI award letter.
- ⦿ A doctor, caseworker, therapist, non-medical service agency, IHSS worker, caregiver, or other reliable third party who is in a position to know about the individual's disability may also provide verification of disability or disability-related need for accommodation.

# *How many* reasonable accommodations can tenants ask for?

- ⦿ Tenants can request multiple accommodations!
- ⦿ Examples
  - Applicant requests landlord to consider evidence they will be a good tenant despite disability-related credit issue
  - Tenant requests to pay rent in person at management office because disability makes using virtual payment platform challenging
  - Tenant who receives eviction notice requests more time to pay rent or comply with lease

# What is a Reasonable Modification?

- ⦿ This is a change to the building or unit that allows a person with a disability to access or use the housing.
- ⦿ The tenant must pay to install the modification and to restore the unit to prior condition if the changes could interfere with next tenant's use.
  - EXCEPTION: If the housing provider receives certain federal financial assistance, the housing provider pays.
- ⦿ Modifications must be correctly installed and comply with codes, e.g., shower grab bars.

# Can a Landlord talk about my Accommodations with other Tenants?

- ⦿ All application, tenant, and guest information about disabilities is confidential.
- ⦿ A landlord may not disclose that information to anyone.
- ⦿ A tenant can authorize release of the information, but is not obligated to release that information.

# Filing a Housing Discrimination Complaint

- ◎ U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD):  
800-669-9777  
[www.hud.gov/program\\_offices/fair\\_housing\\_equal\\_opp/complaint-process](http://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/complaint-process)
- ◎ California Department of Fair Employment & Housing (DFEH):  
800-884-1684 [www.dfeh.ca.gov/complaint-process/file-a-complaint/](http://www.dfeh.ca.gov/complaint-process/file-a-complaint/) Find a list of fair housing resources from DFEH here: <https://bit.ly/3AdfZSh>
- ◎ Local fair housing agency
  - Housing Rights Center: 800-477-5977
  - Fair Housing Council of San Fernando Valley: 818-373-1185
  - Fair Housing Foundation (LA County): 562-989-1206

# For More Information, Contact:

**Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc.**

**3255 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 902**

**Los Angeles, California 90010**

[www.mhas-la.org](http://www.mhas-la.org)



For an intake or if you have questions,  
call us at 213-389-2077.

**For California Relay Service TTY, call 800-735-2929**

**Disclaimer: This material is for educational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. If you have a legal question, please contact MHAS, your local fair housing council or another attorney of your choice.**

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