

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT NOTIFICATION OF RIGHTS TO FEDERAL PUBLIC HOUSING

Background

The Violence Against Women Act of 2005 protects tenants and family members of tenants who are victims of domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking from being evicted or terminated from housing assistance based on acts of such violence against them. The provisions apply to both public housing agencies administering public housing and Section 8 Programs and to owners renting to families under Section 8 rental assistance programs.

DEFINITIONS

Domestic Violence: Includes felony or misdemeanor crimes of violence committed by a current or former spouse of the victim, by a person with whom the victim share a child in common, by a person who is cohabitated with or has cohabitated with the victim as a spouse, by a person similarly situated to a spouse of the victim under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction receiving grant monies, or by any other person against an adult or youth victim who is protected from that person's acts under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction.

Dating Violence: Violence committed by a person:

- (A) who is or has been in a social relationship of a romantic or intimate nature with the victim; and
- (B) (where the existence of such a relationship shall be determined based on a consideration of the following factors: (i) the length of the relationship; (ii) the type of relationship; and (iii) the frequency of interaction between the persons involved in the relationship.

Stalking: to follow, pursue, or repeatedly commit acts with the intent to kill, injure, harass, or intimidate; or to place under surveillance with the intent to kill, injure, harass, or intimidate another person; and in the course of, or as a result of, such following, pursuit, surveillance, or repeatedly committed acts, to place a person in reasonable fear of the death of, or serious bodily injury to, or to cause substantial emotional harm to (i) that person, (ii) a member of the immediate family of that person; or (iii) the spouse or intimate partner of that person.

Immediate Family Member: a spouse, parent, brother or sister, or child of the person, or an individual to whom that person stands in loco parentis (in place of a parent); or any other person living in the household of that person and related to that person by blood or marriage.

PROTECTIONS PROVIDED BY VAWA

In general, the law provides in part that criminal activity directly relating to domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking, engaged in by a member of a tenant's household or any guest or other person under the tenant's control, shall not be cause for termination of assistance, tenancy, or occupancy rights if the tenant or an immediate member of the tenant's family is the victim or threatened victim of abuse.

The law also provides that an incident or incidents of actual or threatened domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking will not be construed as serious or repeated violations of the lease by the victim or threatened victim of that violence and will not be good cause for termination of the assistance, tenancy, or occupancy rights of a victim of such violence.

PERPETRATOR

VAWA contains a new provision of federal law that allows the housing authority, owner or manager to terminate the tenancy of, and evict, an individual tenant or other lawful occupant who engages in criminal acts of physical violence against family members. The action may be taken against the individual alone, without evicting, terminating the tenancy of, removing or otherwise penalizing other household members.

CERTIFICATION OF VICTIM STATUS

The PHA is allowed to request that victims attest to their status by completing, signing and submitting a HUD-approved certification form within 14 business days of the request. On the form the individual certifies that he/she is a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking, and that the incident or incidences in question are bona fide incidences of such actual or threatened abuse. On the certification form, the individual shall provide the name of the perpetrator.

In lieu of a certification form, or in addition to the certification form, a tenant may provide to PHAs, managers or owners, (1) a federal, state, tribal, territorial, or local police record or court record; (2) documentation signed and attested to by an employee, agent or volunteer of a victim service provider, an attorney or a medical professional, from whom the victim has sought assistance in addressing domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking, or the effects of abuse, in which the professional attests under penalty of perjury (28 U.S.C. 1746 to the professional's belief that the incidents in question are bona fide incidents of abuse and the victim of domestic violence or stalking has signed or attested to the documentation.

The PHA, owner or manager should be mindful that the delivery of the certification form to the tenant in response to an incident via mail may place the victim at risk, e.g., the abuser may monitor the mail. Therefore, PHAs, owners and managers may require that the tenant come into the office to pick up the certification form and are encouraged to work with tenants to make delivery arrangements that do not place the tenant at risk.

If the individual fails to provide the certification form within the allotted time, the protections provided by VAWA are voided.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information provided to a PHA, manager or an owner relating to the incident(s) of domestic violence, including the fact that an individual is a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking, must be retained in confidence by the PHA or owner, and must neither be entered into any shared database nor provided to a related entity, except to the extent that the disclosure is (i) requested or consented by the individual in writing; (ii) required for use in an eviction proceeding or termination of assistance; or, (iii) otherwise required by applicable law. The HUD-approved certification form provides notice to the tenant of the confidentiality of the form and the limits thereof.