

## Dechert LLP

**Innovation Title:** Pro bono advocacy challenges Philadelphia housing discrimination

**Company Website:** [www.dechert.com](http://www.dechert.com)

**Year Introduced:** 2022

## Executive Summary

**D**echert, a global law firm, has successfully challenged housing discrimination in Philadelphia through its pro bono efforts to fight for fair housing rights in cases involving discrimination against low-income tenants.

Last year, a Dechert pro bono team partnered with the Public Interest Law Center to represent the Housing Equality Center of Pennsylvania (HEC), the nation's oldest fair housing organization. After conducting an investigation into Pro-Managed LLC, one of Philadelphia's largest landlords, HEC found that Pro-Managed had been refusing to accept housing choice vouchers (also known as "Section 8 vouchers") in predominantly white neighborhoods while advertising their acceptance in majority Black neighborhoods.

In December 2022, Dechert and HEC filed a charge with the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations alleging that Pro-Managed's practices violated the Philadelphia Fair Practices Ordinance (FPO) by discriminating based on source of income. This practice was found to disparately impact prospective Black renters,

thus also violating the Fair Housing Act (FHA).

Almost immediately after the charges were filed, the parties reached a settlement agreement under which Pro-Managed, its owners, and related entities acknowledged that their policy and practice violated the FPO and FHA. As part of the settlement, the parties agreed to submit a consent order to the Court requiring Pro-Managed to advertise that they accept and encourage the use of housing choice vouchers at all of their rental portfolio properties, adopt written policies regarding compliance with fair housing laws, and receive training on compliance with fair housing laws.

"Our involvement highlighted how quickly the legal system can result in concrete successes for people in need," said Dechert partner Steven Bizar, who led the Dechert team. "Pro-Managed's website was updated essentially overnight to correct its discriminatory practices."

Philadelphians who use housing choice vouchers face steep barriers in their search for safe and affordable housing. A study by the Urban Institute revealed that 67 percent of the city's landlords refused to accept the vouchers, a

rejection rate that rose to 83 percent in low-poverty neighborhoods.

Shortly after its success in the Pro-Managed case, Dechert was asked by the Public Interest Law Center to take on another housing discrimination case, this time on behalf of Jennifer Cooper, a 44-year-old Philadelphian with disabilities who had a housing choice voucher. Ms. Cooper faced discrimination from OCF Realty, one of Philadelphia's largest real estate companies, when it refused to rent any of its 3,000+ properties to her. After a six-month investigation, HEC found that OCF Realty consistently refused to rent to voucher holders who could afford advertised rents. Dechert and HEC filed a complaint with the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations on Ms. Cooper's behalf last August.

"Dechert's partnership with the Public Interest Law Center and its pro bono involvement with the HEC has already led to increased protections for low-income tenants in Philadelphia," said Suzanne Turner, head of pro bono at Dechert. "While residents using housing choice vouchers continue to face discrimination, we will continue our fight to protect their fair housing rights."