

# The Star-Ledger

## Coronavirus fears don't allow you to be racist, N.J. attorney general warns

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Landlords can't treat east-Asians differently, and businesses and schools must protect people from bullying amid the coronavirus pandemic, the state attorney general's office stressed Thursday.

Employees are also allowed to stay home to take care of family members with COVID-19, according to new guidelines detailing how state law protects residents.

"COVID-19 is no excuse for racism, xenophobia, or hate," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement. "Discrimination and harassment in violation of New Jersey law remains illegal even if it occurs against the backdrop of a global pandemic."

The virus doesn't discriminate, said Rachel Apter, director of the civil rights division. "Yet there have been disturbing reports of discrimination and harassment targeting Asian people and people with actual or perceived disabilities."

On Sunday in Franklin, a 65-year-old man was charged with bias intimidation, among other charges, after he used a "racial slur" to blame another man in line for the virus.

Landlords may take "reasonable steps" to protect themselves and tenants, the guidelines said, but renting and repair decisions may not be based on race.

There are similar rules for public places and workspaces. Your boss can't fire you because you coughed and appear to be sick, officials said.

"And if you have east-Asian heritage and a coworker repeatedly harasses you by claiming that Asian people caused COVID-19 or calling this 'the Chinese virus,' your employer must take reasonable action to stop the harassment if they knew or should have known about it," according to the guidance.

President Donald Trump has called COVID-19 the "Chinese virus."

The state's discrimination law does allow stores to only allow residents of certain ages to enter at designated times, the guidance said, because "age is not a protected characteristic in places of public accommodation."

Stop & Shop and other stores have set certain times aside for older adults.

One town that tried to limit grocery shopping based on last names, however, was told to stop.

The civil rights office is not taking in-person complaints. Bias incidents can be reported online, and residents may also email “NJBIAS@NJDCJ.org” or call 800-277-2427.

People with housing concerns can call the statewide hotline at 1-866-405-3050.

Other complaints may be directed to regional offices:

- Newark, 973-648-2700
- Trenton, 609-292-4605
- Cherry Hill, 856-486-4080
- Atlantic City, 609-441-3100

Officials also stressed that it’s illegal to retaliate against someone for reporting discrimination.