



Housing Authorities and Advocates Must Join Together to Fight for Housing Assistance for the Most Needy

BY CHARLES ELSESSER



Corey Mathews' article aptly describes the severe funding dilemma facing Public Housing Authorities. At no time in their history have Public Housing Authorities faced a fiscal squeeze like they are now facing. The Housing Authorities built their public housing projects and offered their rental vouchers with an implicit promise that there would be funds available to maintain them. That promise is now being broken.

Mr. Mathews is also on point when he says that there is no good answer absent increased federal funding. Housing Authorities have exploited every efficiency and are now forced to alter their Section 8 voucher programs merely to stay afloat. All of the program changes mentioned by Mr. Mathews severely impact the ultimate beneficiaries of the Section 8 program and ultimately change the nature of the program itself. Freezing rents and lowering payment standards both dramatically reduce the rental stock available to voucher users. Voucher users find it much more difficult to locate a landlord that will accept the voucher and an apartment that is within the payment standard. When the voucher users are able to locate an apartment, it will increasingly be in the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods. Limiting portability will similarly prevent voucher users from moving to a neighborhood with decent schools and better job opportunities. It is incongruous that these federal budget decisions are forcing these changes on such a successful, bipartisan program, initiated by President Nixon with the specific intent of providing increasing housing choice to poor tenants and breaking their cycle of poverty.

In order to maintain the integrity of the program and its focus on extremely low income tenants, many Housing Authorities faced with these tough choices are sacrificing vouchers rather than further impacting the tenants. Miami-Dade County Housing Agency, one of the largest in the state, is anticipating not reissuing approximately 450 vouchers this year--almost 5 percent of its voucher stock. Jacksonville Housing Authority

is anticipating the retirement of a similar number--almost 10 percent of its stock. In order to accomplish this, they are not issuing new vouchers when a voucher turns over. Broward County Housing Authorities are doing likewise.

While not discussed by Mr. Mathews, HUD's attempts to change the substantive requirements of the Section 8 program confirm that these budget policies are simply attempts to accomplish by budgetary means what HUD has been unable, so far, to do legislatively. S. 771 and H.R. 1999, legislation written by HUD and recently introduced in both Houses of Congress, propose to eliminate the elements of the Section 8 program that are so central to the Housing Authorities' mission. S. 771 and H.R. 1999 would eliminate the targeting of the Section 8 vouchers to extremely low-income households, would decouple the calculation of rents from the tenant's income and would otherwise encourage the Housing Authorities' abandonment of their mission of serving the extremely low income. This federal message is not lost on local Housing Authorities. It is a tribute to the Housing Authorities' dedication to serving the most needy that they continue to struggle despite this message of continually decreasing resources and support.

Public Housing Authorities stand virtually alone among housing agencies in their central mission of serving the housing needs of the extremely low-income elderly, disabled and poor families. Many are struggling mightily to maintain that mission despite the lack of support from the federal government. It is important that all housing advocates join with these Housing Authorities in publicizing their dilemma and in fighting for sufficient resources so that they may continue to be focused on that mission.



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