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Sacramento County braces for flood of low-income housing applicants

The last time Sacramento County's housing authority offered poor people the chance to join a waiting list for subsidized rental homes and apartments, 35,000 applications poured in.

That was six years ago, before the economy tanked, thousands of jobs disappeared and state budget problems cut off a key funding stream for low-income housing programs in California.

And so, as it prepares to open the list to 3,000 new applicants next week, the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency is preparing for an unprecedented crush of interest.

From 12:01 a.m. Monday through 11:59 p.m. Friday, June 8, SHRA will be accepting new online applications for federally subsidized housing, previously known as Section 8 and now called the Housing Choice Voucher Program. Under the program, low-income families, disabled people and the elderly generally pay landlords about 30 percent of their income toward rent and utilities in apartments or homes that fall within SHRA's financial guidelines. The federal Housing and Urban Development Agency, through the housing authority, pays the difference.

"We have no way of knowing how many people will apply, but we had 35,000

last time and we are expecting even more this time," said MaryLiz Paulson, director of the voucher program for SHRA.

Demand for subsidized housing is higher than ever, "given our economic times," said SHRA director La Shelle Dozier. "We get constant inquiries about these vouchers. There just isn't enough affordable housing for everyone who needs it."

The gap is unlikely to shrink anytime soon, said Bob Erlenbusch, director of the Sacramento Housing Alliance, a nonprofit that helps connect families with affordable housing. In February, the cash-strapped state diverted new tax funds for redevelopment agencies – a key source of revenue for affordable housing projects – to schools and other agencies. In the meantime, he said, unemployment and poverty remain stubbornly high in the Sacramento area.

A report earlier this year by the National Low Income Housing Commission found that working people across the country are being priced out of the rental market. It found the average American renter earns about \$14 per hour, or about \$4 an hour less than what is required to afford rent and utilities in a "modest" two-bedroom apartment without spending more than 30 percent of his or her income on housing costs.

Finding "decent" affordable housing, the report said, is increasingly difficult.

"Right now we have the perfect storm," said Erlenbusch. "There is no money at the county level or city level or state level for affordable housing. What we have is a crisis that should be at the top of the list of the agendas of our elected officials."

In Sacramento, St. John's Shelter for Women and Children routinely maintains a waiting list of 250 to 300 people for temporary housing, and other shelters also are routinely full.

Few new projects offering permanent affordable housing are in the pipeline for the region, said Erlenbusch. Mercy Housing is finishing one such development, which will offer 150 low-income units at Seventh and H streets in Sacramento.

"I have been doing this for 20 years, and things are absolutely the worst I have ever seen," said Rachel Iskow, director of the Sacramento Yolo Mutual Housing Association, which builds housing for low-income tenants.

"There is so little money out there, so few redevelopment dollars," Iskow said. "We have thousands of people applying to get into an apartment with 50 units."

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SHRA officials say they are prepared to handle the expected onslaught of response to the voucher program next week, although Erlenbusch and others predict chaos.

“I just hope they have enough capacity on their website to handle it, otherwise it’s going to crash,” said Erlenbusch.

Paulson stressed that applications will be taken around the clock Monday through Friday, and no priority will be given to those who are the first to apply. Eligibility is based primarily on income. To qualify, a family’s income generally cannot exceed 50 percent of the median household income of Sacramento County. For a family of four, annual income must be less than \$38,050.

Once the application deadline passes, 3,000 families will be selected through a random computerized process to join the waiting list. They will be notified when housing becomes available.

More than 11,500 families in Sacramento city and county already take part in the voucher program, which distributes \$95 million annually in federal dollars.

“We’re not having much housing turnover these days,” said Paulson. “Because of the economy, people are holding onto this commodity.”

This year, for the first time, applications will be accepted online only, through computers, smartphones and the like. People without such devices can visit area libraries, which will be staffed to help people get to the website and fill out the short application, said Paulson.

“I’m concerned about the fact that it’s online only, because a lot of people don’t have access to the Internet,” said Iskow. “They might not be able to get to a library. Library hours have been cut. Some people could get left out.”

Those who manage to get a coveted place on the waiting list may have to wait as long as two years until suitable housing becomes available, officials said.

Tavarus Blackmon, 33, said it took about a year before he was able to secure a Section 8 apartment in midtown Sacramento in 2003. But the wait was worth it, he said.

Now attending college in pursuit of a degree in film production, he recently moved to a subsidized three-bedroom home in Oak Park with his daughter Hannah, 2, and the girl’s mother, Elizabeth Cord.

“The program has been very good for my family,” said Blackmon. “It has given us stability.” He and Cord work part time, but together don’t earn enough to buy or rent a house, he said.

“Now we have a nice yard, plenty of space, and each of us can give our daughter the time she deserves,” he said. “Without this opportunity, our lives would have been a whole lot different.”