

Number of housing units decline for city's poorest

STAFF REPORTS

Members of the Oregon Opportunity Network, or Oregon ON, say a new report by the Portland Development Commission illustrates how affordable housing units for the poorest are slipping out of grasp for many residents. We're still above 2002 levels, when the benchmark of "no net loss" was created, but nearly 1,500 fewer than where we were just 4 years ago.

"Despite the City's well-intended policies, the number of affordable units downtown continues to drop," said Bobby Weinstock, Housing Consultant for NW Pilot Project. "The reality is, people who need housing can't get it."

The report, compiled by PDC to evaluate the city's "no net loss" housing policy, shows the percentage of total rental units in the 0-30 percent and 31-50 percent median family income (MFI) categories decreased by almost 23 percent in the last three years.

The report inventories housing in the "Central City," defined as Central Eastside, Downtown, Goose Hollow, Lloyd District, Lower Albina, River District, South Waterfront and the University District.

This decrease was mirrored by an 11.8 percent increase in units affordable to households earning at or above 120 percent MFI, due largely South Waterfront development and conversion of planned condo developments to high-end rental units.

"To truly address the loss of affordable units, the City needs to spend urban renewal affordable housing set-aside dollars more effectively," said Debbie Aiona, a representative of the League of Women Voters. "The policy is in place, but has not yet been used to its full advantage."

The City of Portland created the affordable housing set-aside two years ago as a way to avoid the displacement and gentrification often caused by the creation of urban renewal districts.

Despite the decrease in affordable housing in the central city, the report concludes that Portland continues to meet the "no net loss" policy. While numbers of affordable units continue to plummet, they have not yet fallen below the policy's 2002 benchmark of 8,286 units. Currently the number of units meeting policy requirements is about 200 above the benchmark. By contrast, in 2005, around 10,000 units met Policy requirements.

The data from the report will be used for the Portland Plan update, the discussion the creation of a potential new downtown Urban Renewal Area, and updates of central city housing strategies.

Source: Oregon Opportunity Network

Feds extend \$30 million to staunch Section 8 bleeding

Families on the fringe go month-to-month unsure of housing assistance

BY JOANNE ZUHL
 STAFF WRITER

While hundreds of families in Northwest Oregon continue to live month-to-month in hopes of good news for their housing assistance, relief is trickling down from Washington D.C.

The federal government recently announced it will provide \$30 million to people on Section 8 housing assistance, after authorities across the country reported massive shortfalls in funding.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, funds the Section 8 program through local housing authorities. Among them is the Northwest Oregon Housing Authority, which in May notified nearly 300 families in Tillamook, Clatsop and Columbia counties that the authority could no longer afford to provide them housing assistance (Street Roots, "The Letter," June 12). According to news reports and testimony before Congress, the same was happening to authorities across the country, as the economic downturn overburdened the resources for housing assistance. (Street Roots, "The Perfect Storm," June 26)

For Jeff Crist and Jennifer Cherry, a family in Giribaldi Street Roots has been following throughout this crisis, life has been reduced to a stressful, monthly waiting game. The couple, who have three children, were among the hundreds of families dropped from the Section 8 program as of July. Because of disabilities, neither Jeff nor Jennifer have been able to work, and NOHA was covering about 90 percent of their rent.

Last month, NOHA elected to draw on its other funds to pay rent for families to stay in their homes on an immediate basis. Crist says they're secure for the month of August with NOHA's assistance, but he says they probably won't know about September until late in the month.

"They're playing the day-to-day-basis thing on us," Crist says. "Hopefully one of these letters will say we're going to help you like we were. But from day-to-day, you don't know if you're going to be packing or leaving."

In the meantime, Crist says he continues to look for work wherever he might find it, but, he says, "it's not looking really good right now. There are no job openings. But there's a lot of work starting up. I'm keeping my eyes out for any little thing at the employment office."

Cherry is recovering from surgery on a herniated disc in her neck. She is restricted to lifting no more than 10 pounds right now, which limits her work options. But she and Crist are hopeful that as she recovers that restriction will be lifted, and that as the economy strengthens, Crist can find work.

HUD has already spent \$89 million of the \$100 million set-aside fund provided annually by Congress to support housing authorities facing increased demand or "unforeseen circumstances." HUD says the remaining \$11 million will go to agencies



PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS WWW.KENHAWKINS.COM

Jennifer Cherry and Jeff Crist are among hundreds of families in Northwest Oregon who are on the edge of losing housing following federal funding Section 8 voucher funding.

that are on the verge of terminating families. The additional \$30 million will go to agencies that are eligible to receive extraordinary administrative fees for technical assistance to prevent the termination of families. These funds can also be used to fund vouchers, according to HUD. The nation's 2,400 housing authorities were notified at the start of August that the funds would be available. These agencies now have until Aug. 14 to notify HUD that they need this money to prevent existing voucher terminations.

Carol Snell, the executive director with NOHA, says that they immediately applied for \$700,000 out of the \$30 million HUD has made available. If they receive all of that, Snell says, NOHA expects to bring everyone who was terminated from the program back on to vouchers. The housing authority has already spent its reserves for housing, and at this time has no money to support those terminated past August, Snell said.

"We're carrying people for as long as we can, but the housing authority does not have any other pots of money that we can go to to pay rents for September," Snell said.

According to HUD, the funding shortfalls — revealed in May when HUD notified agencies of their 2009 allocations — have impacted about 15 percent of all public housing authorities. HUD says that if it determines that additional funding is needed, it will work with Congress on legislative changes to adjust allocations.

The Section 8 funding system is the subject of a bill now working its way through Congress. SEVRA — the Section 8 Voucher Reform Act, includes provisions that would create more flexibility and stability in funding formulas for housing assistance. Advocates say it's a good move forward, but not enough to correct the

problem of wholesale voucher terminations, the complete scope of which is still not known.

"There's no doubt that some of the policy changes that are contained in the SEVRA bill would help make it less likely that this year's type of situation would recur in future years, so we strongly support that bill, it will give HUD and housing authorities more flexibility in dealing with problems in the future," says Jeremy Rosen, executive director of the National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness in Washington D.C. "That said, no amount of flexibility can get around the situation where there isn't enough money for the program. ... The policy changes and SEVRA just by themselves won't change this problem or fix future problems."

Rosen was among a group of advocates of affordable housing, including the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, National Housing Law Project, and the National Low Income Housing Coalition, that met with HUD to talk about solutions to the current Section 8 crisis. Rosen and others say they will be sending a letter to HUD urging it to ask Congress for additional funds to correct the funding shortage. However, Rosen said that such a request from HUD would be politically unpopular.

"The counter argument, of course, is that you have 285 people in Oregon, not to mention the people in all too many other places around the country where the housing authorities have notified them that they may lose vouchers and could eventually become homeless," Rosen says. "HUD is sincerely looking at ways to make sure no one actually gets terminated, but it remains to be seen if they can actually accomplish it."

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