

Tackling Section 8 in Salem



BY JAKE THOMAS
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“No Section 8.” It’s just one line at the end of a Craigslist or newspaper ad, but these three words can prevent some of Oregon’s poorest and most vulnerable people from obtaining much-needed housing.

Now a politician who has long had this issue in her sights occupies one of the most powerful positions in the state and is seeking to use her influence to change how a large federal housing program operates in Oregon.

Tina Kotek, the recently sworn in speaker of the Oregon House, has introduced legislation intended to remove a big impediment sometimes faced by individuals with Housing Choice vouchers. Often referred to as “Section 8,” these vouchers are a federal subsidy aimed at helping poor, elderly or disabled individuals afford decent housing.

But people who hold these vouchers can have a difficult time getting them accepted because Oregon law allows landlords to refuse them. As a result, some voucher holders lose their chance to get subsidized housing after spending, long periods,

sometimes years on a waiting list because no landlord will accept them.

The Housing Choice program was established by the Housing Act of 1937. The program is administered by local housing authorities and provides a subsidy to participating households to help them make rent. In Portland, the vouchers are administered by Home Forward, the housing agency for Multnomah County.

According to Home Forward spokesperson Shelley Marchesi, in order for someone to be eligible for a voucher they must have an income of 50 percent or less of the median family income for a household their size. Home Forward assists over 8,400 households throughout Multnomah County and contributes over \$50 million in rents annually. When Home Forward opened up its waiting list for Housing Choice vouchers in November for 10 days, according to Marchesi, it received 21,000 applications.

“So, you can see the demand far, far outstrips our ability to tap the supply for folks on the waiting list,” wrote Marchesi in an email to Street Roots.

Despite clear demand for the program and a guaranteed source of income, landlords have been reluctant to participate, which can cause problems for voucher

holders.

According to Marchesi, Home Forward gives Housing Choice voucher holders an initial 60 days to find a landlord who will accept them. If their search is unsuccessful, voucher holders can get another 60-day extension. If a voucher holder has a disability or is facing an extreme situation, they can get another 60 days. After that, they lose their voucher.

According to numbers from Home Forward covering a period from January through September of last year, it took the average voucher holder about 50 days to sign a lease. During that time, the agency issued 496 vouchers. Seventy-four of them expired, making for an expiration rate of 15 percent.

Housing Commissioner Nick Fish said that he began looking at this issue in 2008 shortly after being elected, even though Home Forward is operated independently from him. According to Fish, at the time only 75 percent of voucher holders were able to find landlords that would accept them.

“When vouchers aren’t used, that’s money that’s not going into the community,” said Fish, who added that the elderly,

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For more information and coverage on Section 8 and Oregon housing policy, go to www.news.streetroots.org

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