

# Portland's new affordable housing

*Gray's Landing on Portland's South Waterfront provides housing, community and access*

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Portland's newest affordable housing building is a convenient home for resident Dee Shular. The streetcar stop at her front door provides access to the city she is still learning and the aerial tram a few blocks away is her lift to the Portland VA Medical Center.

Shular is one of the veterans now living at Gray's Landing, the six-story building featuring 209 apartments for low-income residents in Portland's newly developed south waterfront. The building, which opened in December, is the result of a \$50 million partnership between the Portland Housing Bureau and REACH Community Development.

A 52-year-old Air Force veteran, Shular lives in one of the 42 apartments reserved for veterans.

Beginning in the late 70s, Shular installed and repaired military communications systems. But in recent years, she has been left deafened by a brain tumor that grew so large it broke her skull. Needing 10 hours of intensive brain surgery at Portland's VA hospital, she has spent the last two years recovering.

Shular was living in the dormitory-style single room occupancy facility at the VA campus in Vancouver, Wash., but says that was only a temporary solution while recovering from the immediate effects of her surgery.

"In the beginning, living there was fine for me when I wasn't doing well. But as I was getting better I wanted a little more freedom," she says, adding that it was difficult for her to get around Vancouver.

That's when she began talking to her VA housing case manager and was told about Gray's Landing, which was then just a rising

complex of steel and concrete. Construction on the building had broken ground in April 2011 but wouldn't be complete — albeit ahead of schedule — until November 2012.

After being screened by the VA, REACH and Portland's public housing authority Home Forward, Shular says she had her confirmation packet in the mail the next day. By Dec. 1, 2012, Shular was moving into her new apartment.

"Up in Vancouver, I had a very difficult time and I would isolate," Shular says. "Here, you're treated with such dignity and respect, I don't have to isolate."

The building's proximity to the base of the aerial tram makes it easy for residents to get to the Portland VA Medical Center and Oregon Health and Science University complex, a trip that Shular needs to make regularly during her recovery.

"I just jump on the streetcar for a couple of blocks and get on the tram," Shular says. "It takes me right up there and I just walk over to the VA side."

Shular is still recovering, now with the assistance and companionship of her service dog Abigail, a white and black speckled English Setter. She is getting used to living with hearing aids and still gets headaches. And dealing with noisy environments can leave her exhausted. But she's also getting to know her new city.

Born in Vermont and later living in Idaho, she says she didn't know Portland at all before moving into Gray's Landing. Now her location along the southern edge of the Portland Streetcar line makes it easy for her to explore. "I don't feel secluded at all," she says.

Gray's Landing also features several common spaces, including a computer lab, community kitchen and exercise room. Community activities and resources are also available on-site, and Shular says she's



Air Force veteran Dee Shular stands with her dog Abigail in front of Gray's Landing.

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looking forward to the upcoming cooking classes.

"They just have all the convenience you could imagine. If you're really down on your luck, they even have a food pantry now," Shular says. "Even just the simplest thing like you don't have to get quarters for the laundry; it's all on a card. And that's just a little convenience that is way more convenient than having to have quarters all the time."

Shular says she often sits with Abigail on their fifth-floor balcony and looks across the city, often laughing at the commuters stuck in traffic on nearby I-5.

"This is, by far, the best housing that the VA has to offer," Shular says. And as if to prove her point, she talks of another veteran who was a neighbor of Dee's in Vancouver and is also a Gray's Landing resident.

"He was miserable up there," she says.

"You can tell when someone's very unhappy. Down here now, he waves and smiles all the time — he's a different person. We love this area."

Gray's Landing is REACH's biggest project in its 30-year history, according to spokeswoman Laura Recko. In addition to low-income residents and veterans, the facility also houses the offices of REACH, which moved its headquarters to the south waterfront from Southeast Portland.

Named in honor of Portland developer and philanthropist John Gray, a World War II veteran and Bronze Star recipient who died last year, Gray's Landing also has about 5,000 square feet of additional commercial space available for lease.

The facility's eco-minded design led to a LEED-platinum certification and the 30,000-square-foot eco roof is the largest in Portland-metro area.

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disabled, minorities and other protected classes tend to use the vouchers more.

He began working on a task force dedicated to getting more vouchers accepted that included Kotek as well as representatives from landlord groups, Home Forward and other stakeholders. The task force set a goal of getting 90 percent of housing vouchers accepted by landlords. Fish said that this goal had been exceeded by the time the task force disbanded in 2009 by working with landlords to better address their concerns with the program.

"What we learned is that there are many complex reasons for the program not working," said Fish.

Some landlords find the program excessively bureaucratic, having to submit to drawn-out inspections of rental units. Additionally, Housing Choice voucher holders are sometimes stigmatized by landlords as being bad tenants who will damage rentals and then be unable to pay for repairs.

Steve Rudman, Home Forward executive director, said that his agency has been active in trying to work with landlords to make the program work better for them. He said Home Forward has sought to make inspections less onerous for landlords, while also making payments to them electronically. Currently, between 2,000 and 3,000 landlords participate in the program

through Home Forward, he said.

"What we want to see is people with vouchers have choice and be able to live wherever is best for them with jobs, church, schools etc.," he said. "On the other hand, as a housing authority, this is a private sector program so you need private landlords to make this work."

After the task force disbanded, Home Forward established the Landlord Guarantee Fund, which is basically insurance for Section 8 landlords. It guarantees up to two months of rent for landlords if a tenant leaves the unit with over \$1,000 in damages beyond normal wear and tear. According to Marchesi, the fund's initial \$400,000 has been reduced substantially each year because landlords are not making requests for it, which she said is positive.

To date, Home Forward has had six requests from landlords to use the fund, according to Marchesi. Two claims did not qualify. Three claims have been paid, totaling \$2,399. Another claim is under review.

In 2012, Home Forward established the Landlord Incentive Fund, which will pay landlords \$100 for each unit rented to Housing Choice tenants in what the agency defines as a "low-poverty area." The program was initiated to give voucher holders wider choice in where they can live, according to Marchesi.

Although Fish said that initiatives taken by Home Forward have been successful, he

added that they could be undone by Portland's falling rental vacancy rate.

"When you have a 2 percent vacancy rate, landlords can pick and choose," said Fish.

Fish said he'll be lobbying for the bill, as it's part of his broader strategy of helping lower-income renters. He also said its passage is part of the City of Portland's legislative agenda.

Oregon law prohibits landlords from discriminating against tenants based on their source of income, with the exception of Housing Choice vouchers. Kotek's legislation, House Bill 2639, would effectively bar landlords from rejecting a tenant solely because they have a Housing Choice voucher, while still allowing them to deny a prospective renter for other reasons, such as a bad rental history. If passed, Oregon would join nine other states and a smattering of local governments that prohibit discrimination against Housing Choice tenants.

The bill also establishes a landlord guarantee fund, similar to what Home Forward has in place.

"Having such a fund is an important concern for landlords, said Ryan Fisher, a lobbyist for the Oregon Housing Authorities, an association that represents the state's 22 housing authorities.

Additionally, the bill also establishes another fund modeled after a program in Multnomah County that provides assistance to households and individuals having a difficult time paying for housing.

"Kotek has taken a collaborative approach toward this issue and has had multiple meetings to address the concerns of stakeholders, including landlords," said

Janet Byrd, the chair of Oregon Housing Alliance, a coalition of organizations pushing for more affordable housing.

"I feel like the concept, as it's coming forward out of that large group process, really does a great job of balancing those needs and concerns," she said.

Cindy Robert, a lobbyist for the Rental Housing Association of Greater Portland, an association representing landlords, said that Kotek has been inclusive in drafting the bill.

Robert said that she will push for some changes in the bill, which she declined to specify at this point.

Deborah Imsey, Executive Director of the Metro Multifamily Housing, another group representing landlords told Street Roots in an email exchange that she has been working with Kotek on this issue, but stated that it would be premature to comment.

Fisher said he isn't sure what the bill's prospects are given that there are 1,200 other bills that have been introduced.

"Because Tina is speaker of the House [the bill] will have its day in court," Rudman said. "It might not pass, but it will have its day in court."