

Shut out

Rental assistance is a proven tool for ending and preventing homelessness. Too bad Portland's housing market isn't cooperating.

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

Julius Brown and his fiancée, Denise William, thought they had found the perfect home after moving into a two-bedroom apartment in April 2015.

The couple had already lived in the 68-unit complex – the Mitchell Court Apartments at Southeast 72nd Avenue and Foster Road – for five years. They moved from a one-bedroom apartment to a two-bedroom unit in the same complex.

“After five years, you get settled,” Brown said. “We thought we were there for permanent. We thought ... we were home.” Then they got evicted.

On July 1, 2015, three months after they moved into the two-bedroom unit, a 30-day no-cause eviction notice was posted on their door. The notice was posted on all their neighbors' doors, too. The entire building was being evicted.

The Mitchell Court Apartments had been sold to a California-based investment firm the previous month. The property, which Eastwood Partners LLC had bought for \$3.25 million in 2008, sold for \$5.3 million. During the transaction, the Portland Business Journal reported, a perk marketed to the potential buyers was the complex's potential for “positive rent growth.”

A steep rent increase quickly followed the sale and eviction. When Brown and William lived in a one-bedroom apartment at Mitchell Court, they paid a little over \$600 a month. The rent rose to a little over \$1,000 a month.

If they were to stay in their two-bedroom apartment, their rent would have nearly doubled, from \$875 to \$1,500 a month.

Brown and William couldn't afford it. Brown, 56, and William, 60, do not work. They receive \$1,700 a month from Social Security Disability and Supplemental Security Income.

“When you're on SSI and SSD, you can't save any money,” Brown said. “When we got evicted, we had no time to save any money (for the security deposit).”

The couple “didn't know what to do,” Brown said. “The thing that scared us the most was that we would be going back on the street.”

Seven years ago, Brown and William were homeless. Brown had experienced homelessness for eight years, before outreach workers with JOIN, a social service agency, helped the couple move into housing.

“We had been inside for about seven years,” Brown said. “To be forced out back onto the streets really freaked us out.”

They called Quinn Colling, their outreach worker at JOIN. Colling has stayed in touch with the couple since he first helped them find housing in 2008. Colling started calling management companies and helping Brown and William fill out rental applications. They thought about moving in with family on Portland's west side.

They ended up working with the management company that ran Mitchell Court prior to the sale. Brown and William

had a strong rental history and a good relationship with the company, which quickly processed their rental application for a two-bedroom apartment in a complex on Southeast 244th Avenue in Gresham. “Because of the stress, they took the first apartment they could,” Colling said.

It was the only apartment they considered that they could actually afford, Brown said. Even so, they could not have afforded the up-front move-in costs – the first and last month's rent – if not for the rental assistance funds.

Rental assistance is money that social-service agencies use to help homeless people move into housing or to prevent low-income people from being evicted into instability or homelessness. The money is used to pay security deposits and other up-front move-in costs, in addition to all or a part of monthly rent payments. Sometimes people receive assistance for a month or two, until a tenant gets a job or their finances stabilize. People can receive rental assistance for longer, depending on the

circumstances. For nearly a decade, rental assistance has been one of the strongest tools at the city and county's disposal for ending or preventing homelessness. In the Portland metro area, 6,700 households received rental assistance between 2006 and 2010, according to Home Forward, the region's housing authority.

Prior to 2009, rental assistance funding was around \$1.8 million. The federal government's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) pumped more money into the program, bringing funding levels to \$3.5 million. In response to the escalating housing crisis, the City of Portland and Multnomah County have drastically increased the amount of money for rental assistance.

In fiscal year 2015-2016, \$49.9 million in federal and local funds was spent on rental and eviction assistance.

In the 2016-2017 year, funding is expected

See SHUT OUT, page 5