



PHOTO BY ARKADY BROWN

Barbara Ekong, of Portland's Woodlawn neighborhood, receives a voucher to pay most of her rent, thanks to a new pilot project, building on the one created by the Northwest Pilot Project. Without the voucher, Ekong said, "I would probably be out on the street."

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

After Carolyn Lambert, 64, had a stroke last year, she knew she would need help keeping a roof over her head.

Her only income is Social Security Insurance, which leaves her with \$11 after she pays her rent.

Family members often helped her with food, prescriptions or other basic expenses, but after her stroke, Lambert was hit with additional medical costs.

The day after she returned home from the hospital, she called Northwest Pilot Project, a Portland social service agency that serves low-income elderly people.

As Lambert explained her situation, the caseworker told Lambert she was eligible for a new program Northwest Pilot Project was testing.

The program gives seniors and people on fixed incomes, such as Social Security Disability Insurance, a permanent voucher to help pay their rent.

Vouchers are typically used in the federal government's Section 8 and housing choice programs, to subsidize the rent of a qualifying person so that they only pay 30 percent of their income toward their housing. A person is considered to be living in affordable housing if they spend no more than 30 percent of their income on rent.

It's one of the federal government's biggest housing programs to help low-income individuals and families afford housing.

The pilot project spearheaded by Northwest Pilot Project and the region's housing authority Home Forward, however, used funding from a foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust, rather than the federal government.

"I didn't believe it," Lambert said. "It took me a little while to believe that it was true."

VOUCHER POWER

New pilot project will test locally funded housing vouchers in the face of rising rents



PHOTO BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

"I didn't believe it. It took me a little while to believe that it was true. ... It was wonderful to not move."

CAROLYN LAMBERT,
WHO RECEIVES A VOUCHER
THAT PAYS TWO-THIRDS OF
HER RENT

Lambert joined the program. The voucher now pays two-thirds of her rent; she pays the other third.

"You let your breath out," Lambert said.

But can local government-funded vouchers perform a similar function?

A new pilot project, building on the one created by the Northwest Pilot Project, will test that concept in the next year.

This new pilot project, funded with \$375,000 from the Joint Office of Homeless Services, will provide vouchers to 50 people on fixed incomes who live in housing affordable to people who earn 60 percent of the area median family income, or \$43,980 for a family of four. The vouchers will be disbursed later this year.

There is little question that giving vouchers to impoverished people to pay a portion of their rent is effective.

The larger question is whether it can end homelessness and displacement at a low cost and, if so, if local government can afford to increase the program.

reasonably afford is well below the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the city, which is now over \$1,100 a month.

It's another statistic among many that confirms it is impossible for someone who relies solely upon a Social Security disability or insurance check to afford an apartment in the Portland area.

"Their fixed incomes create very significant challenges for them to find rental housing," Marc Jolin, the director of the Joint Office of Homeless Services, said.

The biggest problem – which locally, vouchers may be able to solve – is that the fixed amount of a person's disability or insurance check is unchanging.

"That's not a temporary circumstance," Jolin said, adding that the gap between their income and their rent will persist.

"If we want to help them stay off the street," he said, "we have to find a way to sustain the rental assistance."

The voucher pilot program is the brainchild of Bobby Weinstock, a housing advocate with Northwest Pilot Project. So strong is his advocacy for vouchers that Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury jokingly refers to the pilot project as "the Bobby Weinstock voucher."

For years, Weinstock has advocated for increasing the amount of affordable housing in the Portland region. Since the 1990s, Northwest Pilot Project has published an inventory of low-income affordable housing in the inner city, showing a gradual loss of affordable housing.

According to the most recent report, Multnomah County needs to build 23,585 housing units affordable to the lowest income renters in order to meet demand.

Weinstock became convinced vouchers could play a larger role in reducing homelessness and displacement after he

Approximately 18,000 Multnomah County residents receive disability checks through the federal government's Social Security disability program.

The maximum amount a person can receive each month is \$735. Annual cost-of-living adjustments in the last seven years, according to federal data, are less than 2 percent each year. A 0.3 percent increase was made in 2017. Low-income seniors who rely solely on Social Security Insurance as their monthly income, like Lambert, have similar incomes that are low and fixed.

A person receiving Social Security Disability Insurance can afford to rent a unit priced at \$221 a month, according to "Out of Reach," an annual report from National Low Income Housing Coalition released earlier this month.

The report ranks Oregon as 18th in the nation and shows that a person must make \$19.78 an hour, working full-time for the entire year to afford average apartment rent.

What a person on disability can

See VOUCHER, page 11