

HOME, ON HOLD

Multnomah County's wait lists for local and federal housing subsidies closed in 2016, leaving people in need of homes feeling anxious and defeated

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Patience is a virtue, so the saying goes. But if you're poor and looking for affordable housing in the Portland area, patience is also a daunting necessity.

Just glance at the estimated wait times to get an apartment through Home Forward, Multnomah County's housing authority and Oregon's largest provider of subsidized housing. At 41 properties managed by Home Forward, the estimated wait times for an apartment range from two years to more than 20 years.

The lists for these Home Forward properties are closed to new applicants and have been since 2016. None will reopen until the expected wait time falls to 12 months or less, perhaps next year at some properties, agency officials say.

The situation is also bleak for the thousands seeking a federal Section 8 voucher to rent an apartment from a private landlord. This voucher program, with \$20 billion annually coming from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is the largest single source of money to subsidize rents for low-income Americans.

Since the list closed in 2016, none of the more than 3,000 on the list have been issued a voucher due to lack of funds, say officials at Home Forward, which operates the voucher program. When the voucher waitlist was last opened two years ago, more than 16,000 people applied.

"We have received 300 applications in less than an hour" after a waitlist is opened to new applicants, said Roanna La Greide, director of property management and compliance at Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare, a local nonprofit that operates about 500 subsidized housing units for people with mental-health and addiction problems.

The rush is so great that most of the people don't even know what specific building they are applying for, La Greide said. "They just want to get into housing."

Wait times to get into a unit at Cascadia typically range from several months to several years. Other providers of subsidized housing report expected wait times ranging from three to 20 months for someone applying now.

After being told by housing officials she might have to wait years to get an apartment she could afford, Tina Drake said she felt "defeated and deflated." In a recent interview, the Street Roots vendor said she was staying in a shelter, looking for a job and hoping to find stable housing.

"Portland is being gentrified," she said. "It's a high-income city."

The wait is indicative of the housing

crisis Portland and similar cities are experiencing around the country as rising rents and home prices have outpaced the growth in many people's earnings or government housing subsidies. A 2016 survey by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, found that at more than 300 public housing agencies around the country, more than half the waitlists for the federal rent-voucher program were closed to new applicants. The report's analysis concluded the nation needed an estimated 7 million additional units of affordable housing for the lowest-income people.

On any given night, more than 500,000 people are estimated to be homeless in the U.S., while millions are paying more than half their monthly income on rent and utilities.

A 2017 HUD report said that as of 2015 more than 8 million households had this "severe rent burden," up 7 percent from two years earlier. (U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders has said the current nationwide number is nearly 11 million.) The financial crunch on renters is "common in every region and metropolitan category across the nation," HUD's report stated.

HUD defines affordable housing as spending no more than 30 percent of a household's monthly income on housing costs.

The problem is particularly acute in fast-growing metro areas, such as Portland, where the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is up more than 50 percent since 2011, according to data collected by Multifamily NW, a member organization for the rental-housing providers. And the conditions of the housing for low-income households is

often poor: The HUD 2017 Worst Case report said that of 125,000 low-income households in the Portland metropolitan area, which includes Hillsboro and Vancouver, nearly 45 percent suffered from severe housing problems.

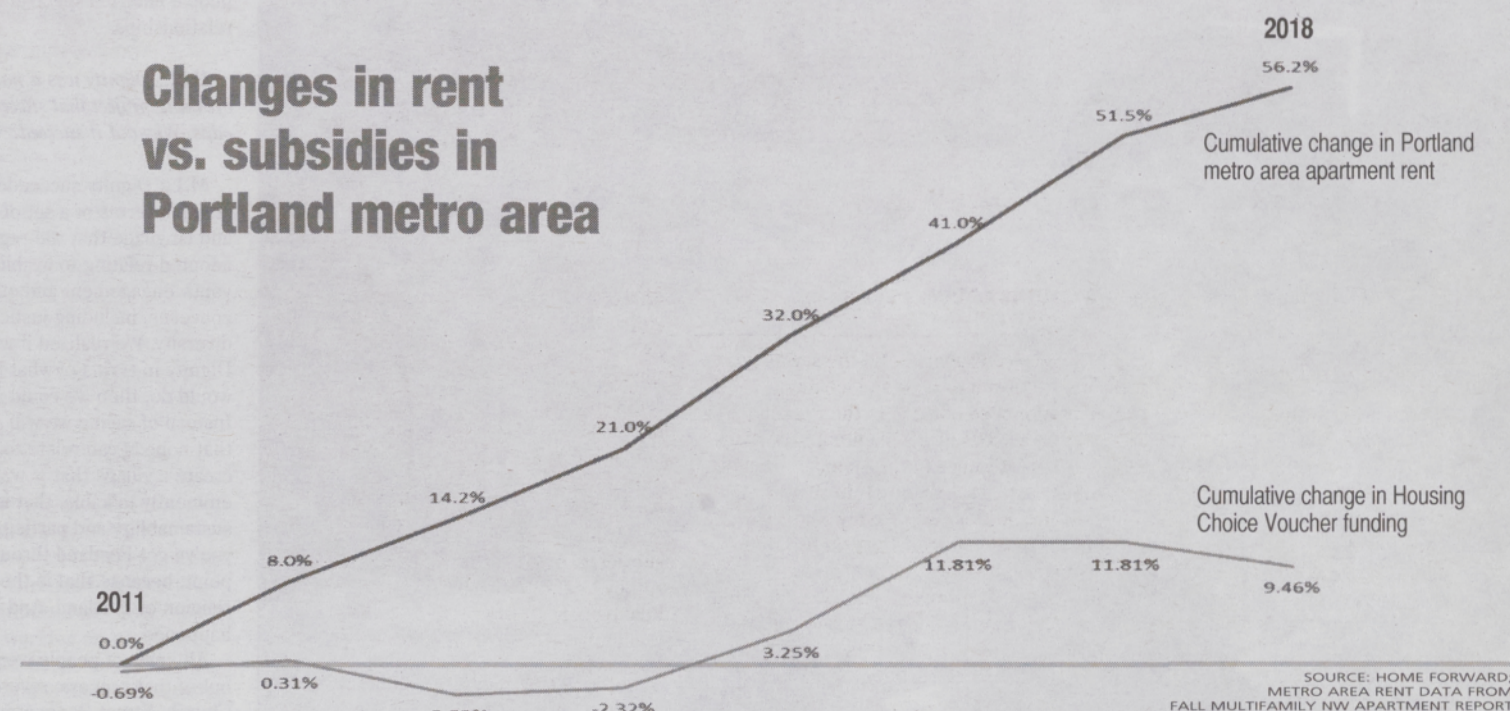
Though Home Forward is authorized to issue nearly 6,300 such vouchers locally, there are fewer than 5,600 outstanding. Because of rising rents, which increases the amount that needs to be subsidized through each voucher, there isn't enough federal money to fully pay for the ones outstanding agency officials said. Last year, Home Forward drew more than \$4 million from its own reserves to make up the difference.

"We can't, year after year, keep funding from our reserves," said Home Forward's executive director, Michael Buonocore. Home Forward officials said they can't predict when the agency will resume offering tenant vouchers to people on the waitlist.

Home Forward officials have added more than 50 households to the waitlist that include someone who is terminally ill. Such applicants are added even if the waitlist is closed.

There are also smaller federally funded voucher programs to help veterans and the disabled. Recently, for instance, Home Forward was tapped to receive HUD funding for 159 veterans' vouchers. Currently, about 550 are being used locally. Home Forward is also receiving its first money for vouchers, 99 of them, earmarked to help people with disabilities pay for housing, which could include some of the people on the

Changes in rent vs. subsidies in Portland metro area



3,000-plus main waitlist.

It's been nearly 70 years since Congress set as a national goal "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family." However, HUD officials later called it "a commitment without a timetable and without adequate means for accomplishment."

Since that congressional declaration in 1949, the nation's commitment to ensuring housing for all Americans has waxed and waned against the backdrop of a continuing debate over the rights of the needy and the government's obligations to the poor. President Bill Clinton, for instance, in a 1996 speech declared, "Public housing has never been a right; it has always been a privilege."

But for those in need, a privilege can often look like a necessity. While waiting to get a subsidized apartment or to even get on a waitlist, finding a place to lay your head can be an ongoing struggle, said Emily Waldron, who works at a program of Catholic Charities of Oregon to help poor people in the Portland area obtain services. Of her 20 clients, Waldron said, all but two list obtaining housing as their top priority.

One of Waldron's clients, Kimberly Moline, has been actively looking for an affordable apartment for a year. She said she has contacted nearly a dozen social service and housing agencies and asked to be put on several dozen waitlists. The 54-year-old, who uses a wheelchair, has been told that wait times range from 18 months to five years.

Moline had been steadily employed at various jobs until about a decade ago, when chronic and painful nerve problems forced her to give up work. Her sole source of income is a Social Security payment of \$750 a month.

After being unable to keep up the rent at an apartment in Tigard, she lived for a time at a duplex in Salem in what she describes

as "a horrible situation" that also left her far away from her doctors in Portland. She is now back in the Portland area, staying in the living room of a friend.

She worries about overstaying her welcome, feels pressure to move again and fears she might not find an affordable place for many months more. The hunt for a new home has been "horrible, horrific," she said, adding that the anxiety "is just killing me."

Efforts are underway to improve the affordable-housing picture locally. Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler has said his administration aims "to dramatically increase the number of affordable-housing units in Portland" and pointed to efforts to build or preserve several thousand units, with part of the work being paid for by a \$258 million bond measure passed by voters in 2016.

On Nov. 6, residents in Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties approved a \$652.8 million bond measure and funding allowances to create or preserve up to 12,000 affordable-housing units.

Especially hard hit by the affordable-housing shortage are senior citizens and people with disabilities who are living on fixed incomes.

Some help has started coming through a locally funded pilot voucher program to subsidize rent for senior citizens and others in need. Forty-five households are receiving an average \$700-a-month subsidy created by Multnomah County, Northwest Pilot Project, Meyer Memorial Trust and Home Forward.

While this voucher program is still "tiny," its aim is to "show we can do long-term rent assistance" locally, said Laura Golino de Lovato, executive director of Northwest Pilot Project, which helped start the project.

Sharon Newell thinks this voucher

program helped save her life. The 68-year-old widow, who has multiple sclerosis and is prone to seizures, moved to Portland from Springfield early last year to be nearer to her doctors.

With about \$700 a month from Social Security, market-rate apartments were beyond her reach. She contacted subsidized housing projects but was routinely told that waitlists stretched out for years.

"I thought I would never find housing," Newell said. "There was absolutely no way on Earth to afford an apartment."

For months, she bounced from one temporary living arrangement to another, sleeping on couches, in garages and, for a week, in an automobile she had been given access to. Extremely sensitive to various odors, from coffee to colognes, Newell said that at one point she suffered seizures daily for a month. By late last year, her health had sunk to the point where "I wasn't sure if I would be here next week."

Just before last Christmas, a representative from Northwest Pilot Project, which Newell had contacted for help, called to tell her she'd been accepted into the voucher pilot project. Today, she is living in a bright, cozy one-bedroom apartment in Northeast Portland. There is even a small yard for her therapy dog, Gracie, a Chihuahua-dachshund mix who's been trained to sense the onset of a seizure.

The voucher program "was like a gift of God," said Newell, whose health has improved since finding stable housing.

Golino de Lovato hopes the voucher program can be expanded to help hundreds of seniors. While voucher programs have to deal with rising rents in the private housing market, they are "a better long-term solution than shelters or hotel rooms," she said. Or, she added, bearing the costs of having people homeless.