

Tribe suspends student rental aid for the summer

Federal government rewriting eligibility rules for popular program

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The Tribal Housing Authority's Student Rental Assistance Program is being suspended, starting in June, for three summer months.

The popular program serves more than 200 low-income Tribal members attending college.

As a result of emerging federal requirements, the Tribal Housing Authority is taking the summer to rewrite the program's rules and policies rather than try to administer a program that Brian DeMarco, assistant executive director of the Tribal Housing Authority, called, "a moving target."

"We thought those were the months when our students would be least impacted," DeMarco said. The decision was made at the direction of the Tribal Housing Authority Board.

The program was one of the first of its kind when the Housing Authority initiated it in June 2006. Since then, the Tribe has had inquiries from other Tribes wanting to start a program of their own. The practice has grown in popularity here and across the nation.

The Tribe learned that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was tightening its eligibility rules following an audit conducted last June of the Grand Ronde program.

HUD's rule changes fall principally in two areas.

First, HUD is now insisting that students under 23 years of age include their parents' income in evaluating eligibility, according to Joani Dugger, part of the management team at the Tribal Housing Authority and the department's HUD specialist.

When parental income is included, said Dugger, many who qualify now will no longer be eligible for the program.

The second policy change requires that student rental rates are evaluated in terms of fair market rates for the area.

In rewriting rules for the program, the Tribal Housing Authority is looking at how to fairly allocate the HUD budget for the program. How does the program fund the cost of fair market rental housing, for example, when at some colleges housing is costlier than at others? The more high-cost rentals the program funds, the fewer grants it can make.

Currently, and through May, student rental assistance provides eligible students a monthly stipend up to \$500 per month for full-time attendance, \$375 per month for three-quarter time attendance or \$250 per month for half-time attendance.

Although the new HUD rules have not yet been issued, HUD officials have told the Tribe basically how they will change, noting that the federal agency could seek reimbursement for grants made after May that do not comply with the rules being developed.

With more than 200 students now receiving benefits in excess of \$700,000 a year, the cost to the Tribe for non-compliant grants could be substantial, said DeMarco.

For 2013, HUD budgeted \$2.9 million for all Tribal housing programs though Dugger notes that federal budget constraints may shave off 5 percent before the year is out.

The Student Rental Assistance Program is the Housing Authority's largest program.

Since its creation in 2006, the program has grown 10 times in terms of students – from 20 in 2006 to more than 200 today. In terms of cost, the program is more than 20 times as expensive. In 2006, HUD paid \$30,000 for rental assistance to Grand Ronde Tribal students. This year, the federal agency will pay \$700,000.

The Tribe also makes grant opportunities available to Tribal students through the Education Department. ■

Carving class



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Shirod Younker (Coquille/Coos) uses a block plane to help Dakota Ross shape the Tillamook-style canoe paddle he's making during the "Making a Tillamook-Style Canoe Paddle" class held at the Grand Ronde carving shed on Friday, May 10. The class was held May 9-11.



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