

Housing vouchers going unused

Even with subsidy, cost puts rentals out of reach for many

By **BRENNA VISSER**
The Bulletin

BEND — Central Oregon represented a new start for Lisa Whiat.

Whiat, 56, came to Bend roughly five years ago after fleeing an abusive relationship in Idaho. She just wanted to disappear and start over.

Starting over proved difficult, though, in Central Oregon's notoriously expensive housing market. After being homeless for years, Whiat secured a Section 8 housing choice voucher — a federal housing program that helps qualified recipients cover the cost of rent.

But Whiat is still struggling to find anything she can afford, with some rentals asking \$500 more than she can pay. It's a situation growing more common among those who receive the federal housing vouchers. According to Housing Works — Central Oregon's housing authority — 40% of the vouchers are currently being used because rents are too high.

That essentially means for every 100 vouchers issued, only 40 get used, said Lesly Gonzalez, the housing choice voucher director for Housing Works.

"The lack of affordable housing is the biggest concern," Gonzalez said.

'We need housing right away'

There are places Whiat can afford, but she continues to be put on waitlist after waitlist. Whiat is staying in a shelter bed provided by the non-profit St. Vincent de Paul. She hopes to find a place where she can be comfortable, and perhaps grow some of her own flowers.

"We don't need to be put on waiting lists, we need housing right away," Whiat said. "That's why we apply for things like this. Otherwise, it could mean us going back out and becoming homeless again."

"I'm getting that hand up,"



The Stillwater Crossing affordable housing apartments under construction at the south end of Bend in October.

Whiat continued. "I'm just needing to be able to put it to good use."

The gap between what U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, offers for rent assistance and the actual price of rentals has always been an issue to some degree since Gonzalez began working for the housing authority more than 15 years ago.

But what concerns Gonzalez now is the pace by which rents are increasing.

Up to date data on rental prices in Deschutes County is difficult to estimate, according to city of Bend Housing Director Lynne McConnell and Damon Runberg, a regional economist.

According to Dwellsy.com, a private company that tracks rents across the country, the median rent in Bend is \$2,200 as of March — a 10%, or \$205 increase from last March.

Voucher amounts aren't staying stagnant either. In 2020, HUD raised its assessment of what fair market rents were by \$150 — the largest increase in a single year Gonzalez has ever seen.

Additionally, a housing authority can pay up to 110%

of what is established as fair market rent for the year, and up to 120% if the person is disabled or needs another kind of exception.

But still it's not enough. "Even with all of these increases ... we still find families are unable to find affordable housing even with extra support," she said.

Traditionally more affordable options, such as mobile home parks, are also becoming less reliable, Gonzalez said. Rent for a space in a mobile home park, which used to go for roughly \$300 a month, now is creeping up to \$800 or \$900 a month.

New development is coming online in Bend, but most of it is unaffordable, she said. Even so, the new development allows people making more income to move out of more affordable units into newer ones. But then property management companies are raising the rents of the old units to fair market value, anyway, she said.

This year, the waitlist to receive a housing choice voucher is 2,200 people long. Roughly 100 vouchers have been assigned off that waitlist so far, she said. Typically in past years, 400 to 500 are

distributed in a year, Gonzalez said. The average family of four on this waitlist makes \$22,665 a year.

There are roughly 50 affordable housing projects in Deschutes County that either already exist or are in the pipeline, according to data from Oregon Housing and Community Services.

"If we have 2,200 applicants on the waitlist, that's as many (affordable) units we need in Central Oregon," Gonzalez said.

An emergency housing voucher program, which was funded through the American Rescue Plan Act last year, is seeing a higher degree of success, Gonzalez said.

Out of the 96 emergency vouchers allocated to Central Oregon, 51 have been used for housing, according to Johannah Johnson-Weinberg, the community outreach lead for Thrive Central Oregon, a local housing nonprofit.

Several barriers contribute to the struggle of getting housed, Johnson-Weinberg said. A criminal history, a lack of rental history, an eviction record, and low to no credit all can make finding a place difficult, even with extra help from a voucher.

But organizations like Thrive are specialists in navigating these challenges, and can often help clients overcome them, she said.

The only thing they can't overcome is a rental market that continues to skyrocket, Johnson-Weinberg said.

"If a three bedroom (apartment) is upwards of \$2,500 or more and someone's voucher is not that much, there's no way around that," she said.

The emergency housing voucher was a lifeline for Fred Storm, a 64-year-old Bend man who was homeless for roughly three years before being able to secure housing.

At one time a lawyer, Storm struggled to keep stable housing while also battling a gambling addiction. He eventually gave up that career after getting in trouble with the California State Bar twice, he said.

He moved to Bend in 2016 to realize his life long dream of living in a place he used to vacation often. But his gambling addiction led him to living in his car starting the winter of 2018.

"You hit rock bottom when you wake up, and it's 17 degrees, and you have to spend \$15 a night to keep your car running so you don't freeze in the St. Charles parking lot," he said.

Before the pandemic, Storm had been given rental assistance opportunities

twice from NeighborImpact, but ran into barriers such as long waitlists, high prices and a housing record that showed his previous eviction.

But after the emergency housing voucher was introduced, Storm was identified as a part of a vulnerable population to qualify. Storm receives dialysis three times a week for end stage renal disease, which affects the kidneys.

With the coordinated efforts of several service providers, Storm was able to move up the waitlist, move out of his car and into an affordable housing complex called Legacy Landing by the end of 2021.

"I was so happy I nearly cried," he said.

Storm credits the extra resources that were given out during the pandemic — the emergency housing vouchers, the extra unemployment benefits and others — for why he is off the streets today.

"The emergency housing voucher from HUD was literally a life changing event," he said.

While the addition of more affordable units is critical, it's not the only thing that is needed to help people stay housed, said Stacey Witte, the executive director of the homeless outreach non profit REACH.

It is also important to invest more into support services that help transition people who may have lived outside for years to build up certain skills, like how to keep track of bills and other life skills, she said. While systems are in place today to help with this, more are needed.

"We don't want to get people into housing and set them up for failure, then in a year they are back to being homeless," Witte said.

New affordable housing complexes, including Canal Commons and Stillwater Crossing in Bend, are also helping making a dent, she said. But not much will change until there is much, much more.

"It's heartbreaking," Witte said when asked what it's like to watch the people she serves not be able to use their vouchers. "They want it so badly. They are working so hard to get it. They are doing everything that's required and it's taking so long."

Patriot Plumbing
★★★★★
Sinks & Toilets, Delta Faucets, Bradford White, Water Heaters
245 N. Canyon Blvd., Canyon City
541-575-2144 • Mon-Fri. 8am-4:30pm

Serving Grant County for 50 years!
Chester's Thriftway
Proud of being Locally Owned & Operated — 541-575-1899

Bank of Eastern Oregon
"CELEBRATE THE SPIRIT OF YOUR HOMETOWN"
Member FDIC
John Day 541-575-1862 • 200 W. Main
Prairie City 541-820-3321 • 178 NW Front St.
Equal Housing Lender

Eastern Oregon Realty
160 E. Main • John Day, OR 97845
Office: 541-575-2121
Home: 541-820-3721
JFranklin@easternoregonrealty.net
www.easternoregonrealty.net
Jerry Franklin
GRI, ABR, SRES
Broker/Owner

Blue Mountain HOSPITAL DISTRICT
Quality Healthcare Close to Home
170 Ford Rd., John Day, OR 97845 • 541-575-1311

Virginia McMillan, DDS PC
IMMEDIATE DENTAL COMFORT
LONG TERM VALUE
541-575-0550

PIONEER FEED & FARM SUPPLY
60561 HWY 26,
John Day, Oregon 97845
541-575-0023

The Outpost
Breakfast Lunch & Dinner
201 W. Main
541-575-0250

GRANT COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
May, 2022

MUSEUMS ARE OPEN!
Well, the tourist season is officially here! Four of the five of our local museums are now open. Kam Wah Chung officially opened May 1st, the Grant County Historical Museum and the Ranch and Rodeo Museum are also open for the season. It is not yet known if DeWitt Museum in Prairie City will be opening this year. We sure hope it does because it is a treasure!

Chamber Gets New Sign
Have your seen our new sign with the digital message board? We are so happy with it! It was definitely worth the wait. If you see Taci Philbrook, tell her what a great job she did on the design. Thank you Taci!

Cycle Oregon – Ride the Painted Hills
September 11-17

We still have a few jobs to fill for the Painted Hills Classic Ride. If you have a group that would like to earn some extra money this fall, please let us know.

Check the calendar on the Chamber website for upcoming events.

GRANT COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
www.gcoregonlive.com

Eds
PROPANE 541-575-0804
OIL 541-575-1348
243 N. Canyon City Blvd.,
Canyon City, Oregon
Ed Staub & Sons

• etc •
A UNIQUE BOUTIQUE FEATURING LOCAL ARTISANS FROM GRANT COUNTY
133 W. Main, John Day, OR
541-620-2638 • etc.handmade@yahoo.com

Solutions
Certified Public Accountants
101 NE 1st Ave. John Day, Oregon 97845
541-575-2717

SUBWAY
eat fresh.
121 S. Canyon Blvd.
John Day • 541-575-0782

Duke Warner Realty
Dayville, Oregon
"Your professional Real Estate choice in Grant County"
www.dukewarnerrealtyofeasternoregon.com
Lori Hickerson Principal Broker, GRI Office: 541-575-2617
Sally Knowles Broker, GRI Office: 541-932-4493
Babette Larson Broker, GRI Office: 541-987-2363

OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK!
161 E. Main, John Day • 541-575-0632
True Value
HARDWARE

LEN'S DRUG
541-575-0629
120 E. Main, John Day
www.lensdrug.com
We're here when you need us!

DAYVILLE MERC
207 W. Franklin Ave, Dayville
Cold Drinks • Groceries • Snacks
Gifts • Friendly Services
541-987-2133

DGDriscoll's BOOKS!
F is for:
Dick Francis,
Ken Follett,
or C. S. Forester
Mon, Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat; 10 til 6
248-719-2122
In Canyon City just across from the post office

TOM CHRISTENSEN CONSTRUCTION
(541) 410-0557 • (541) 575-0192
CCB# 106077
REMODELS • NEW CONSTRUCTION • POLE BUILDINGS
CONCRETE EXCAVATION • SHEET ROCK • SIDING
ROOFING • FENCES • DECKS • TELESCOPING FORKLIFT SERVICES

Budget 8 Motel
711 W Main St, John Day, OR 97845 • (541) 575-2155

CANYON CREEK Clinic
Shawna Clark, DNP, FNP
541-575-1263
235 S. Canyon Blvd. John Day, Oregon 97845
Accepting new Patients! Go to:
www.canyoncreekclinic.com