

Housing program: Win-win for landlords?

It could be when worked out, shelter director says

BY LISA KLIONSKY
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Solving the discrepancy between the Delonis Center's wide-open front door but often sticky back door to permanent housing is what those who've worked on Washtenaw County's blueprint to end homelessness seek to do.

What can help, they said, is both a federally subsidized housing voucher known as a Section 8 – and a proposed local program that would provide ongoing support to both tenants and their Section 8 landlords if any issues or questions arise regarding such issues as money management, medical care or conflict mediation.

Julie Steiner, executive director at Alpha House in Ann Arbor, a shelter for families run by the Interfaith Hospitality Network, said the proposed pilot program could be a win-win for landlords who have been reluctant to accept Section 8 tenants and for the homeless.

"We're willing to prove it to them," she said.

Section 8 vouchers pay most of the rent for tenants at certain income levels; voucher recipients spend between 30 percent and 40 percent of their incomes on rent.

While 98 percent of the homeless shelter clients qualify for the vouchers, only about 1 percent of them leave with one in hand, said Delonis Executive Director Ellen Schulmeister.

The problem is twofold: getting vouchers is a lengthy, wait-listed process and often there is little Section 8-friendly housing available in the Ann Arbor area.

Alpha House staff will "go out and talk to landlords who advertise they accept Section 8, and then they have minimum-income requirements for tenants, but those requirements are often so high the person wouldn't qualify for a Section 8 voucher (in the first place)," Steiner said. "We're trying to get landlords to agree to work with us to take people on Section 8 when they normally don't."

More than 680 applicants are currently on the Ann Arbor

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Julie Steiner, executive director at Alpha House, a shelter for families

Housing Commission's Section 8 waiting list, 40 families have a voucher in hand and are searching for homes, and another 93 are in the screening process, said Cynthia Telfert, the commission's housing programs director. The commission has a total of 1,333 vouchers, she said.

Diana Kern, executive vice president and director of properties for McKinley, the Ann Arbor-based national landlord, said contracts, inspections and paperwork required by Section 8 regulations make area landlords reluctant to participate.

But in the past few years, with the creation of the Washtenaw Housing Alliance and the nexus of private resources and interest in identifying affordable housing, more landlords are paying more attention.

So McKinley and Alpha House are trying to put the pilot program in place.

Under the proposal, McKinley would provide five apartments, the housing commission the vouchers, and Alpha House the supportive services the tenants and landlords might need.

The proposed project is very much still in its early stages, Kern said.

"We would make concessions realizing that people out of the shelter may have negative landlord histories and credit issues," she said. "I hope we can work out the details so we can offer the apartments."

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