

StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Chip Halbach: Please be patient -- we'll get to you in 25 years

By CHIP HALBACH

July 22, 2009

Just over a year ago, the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) opened its waiting list for families seeking Section 8 rent assistance. This was the first time in five years the waiting list had been opened.

More than 12,000 households applied.

It turns out that not one of those who applied a year ago has yet received assistance through MPHA's Section 8 program. Before getting to last year's applicants, MPHA is just finishing offering assistance to those already in its six-year-old queue. Only about 40 rental vouchers come available each month in Minneapolis.

Should the 12,000th applicant still be around, he or she would find help in July 2034.

Continuing bad news on unemployment and the rapidly rising use of Minnesota food shelves present compelling reminders that Congress should not again miss the chance to expand the Section 8 federal rent subsidy program. It helps families bridge the gap between what they can afford, based on income, and rent for a basic apartment.

When the House and Senate debated the economic stimulus bill earlier this year, many community leaders urged that Section 8 funding be included in the legislation. Yet Congress failed to invest in this best available means to mitigate the increases in homelessness that come with job loss and recession.

Today, the slow-to-come economic stimulus underscores the need for an effective safety net to enable Minnesotans to meet their most basic needs during hard times. Too many people are being forced to choose between housing and food.

There is a clear link between housing and food expenditures for lower-income households. Harvard's 2009 "State of the Nation's Housing" report found that, for families with the smallest expense budgets (and most likely to be low-income), those paying half or more of their income for housing spent \$138 less each month on food, compared to those living in housing that was affordable for them.

For the first quarter of 2009, Hunger Solutions reported visits to Minnesota food shelves were up by 134,000 over the prior year -- a record increase. While tens of thousands of people seek food assistance, many also need housing.

I helped interview some Section 8 applicants last year. As a promoter of affordable

housing, our agency wanted to learn about those seeking help with their rent. We found a quarter of the applicants were homeless. When we asked what people would do with "extra" money if the cost of rent went down, the most common response was that they would be able to spend more on food.

We also discovered that many applicants sought rent assistance due to recently being laid off. Those looking for help with rent were most frequently employed as personal care assistants, or in manual labor, office work, or food service. In these occupations, pay is hardly adequate to meet living expenses, much less enable the savings to weather layoffs in a tough economy.

Last year, Minnesota unemployment measured 5.3 percent, far lower than the 8.4 percent reported in June. The recent surge in homelessness and food shelf use is no surprise in this economy.

Congress is considering whether to increase the authorized number of Section 8 rental vouchers. Though lawmakers did not make this happen as part of the federal stimulus, they have the chance to do so now.

Certainly, there is a budget deficit, and priorities must be set. But we will not reach economic stability by forcing people to choose between shelter and food.

Chip Halbach is the executive director of the Minnesota Housing Partnership.

© 2009 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.