

Portland's Section 8 clients are shifted east of 82nd Avenue: Locked Out, Part 2

Published: Saturday, June 02, 2012, 4:00 PM Updated: Tuesday, June 05, 2012, 9:38 AM



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Enlarge

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From left: Somiya, 3, Tanisha Green, 29, Micah, 6, Diovionne, 12, and Amari, 9, pose for a family photo on their front porch.

Portland's Section 8 clients are shifted east of 82nd Avenue:

Locked Out, Part 2 gallery (8 photos)

Portland's Tanisha Green finds limited choices in using her Section 8 voucher

The mother of four is among African American residents with Section 8 vouchers pushed east of 82nd Avenue. She wanted a yard for her children to play in and moved to a house right on busy Southeast Division Street to get it.

The morning after moving, Tanisha Green can't stop talking about her front yard.

The patch of grass is boxed in by a chain-link fence, separating her kids' new play space from the heavy traffic that flies down four lanes of Southeast Division Street. But the yard is all she really wanted. To get it, the mother of four had to leave Portland for Gresham to find a landlord willing to take her Section 8 voucher.

"It was worth it," said Green, resting in the cramped living room of her three-bedroom house, boxes stacked toward the ceiling, rejection still fresh on her mind. "No one else would accept me. I had to move here."

Green has plenty of company.

An investigation by The Oregonian has found that Home Forward, the housing authority that serves Multnomah County, has failed over the past decade to equitably distribute units throughout the county in its Section 8 program and the rentals it directly

controls. As a result, most residents who rely on federal housing assistance live in the very neighborhoods that Home Forward officials acknowledge offer fewer opportunities for a better life.

Home Forward provides more affordable housing than any agency in the Portland metro area, serving 15,000 households with everything from studios for single adults to Section 8 vouchers for families. Yet its checkered track record sharply illustrates the yawning gap between the vision for the nation's 44-year-old Fair Housing Act -- to give everyone, regardless of color, the opportunity to live in a decent neighborhood -- and the reality.

Governments and agencies that accept federal money for affordable housing -- Home Forward received about \$85

million last year -- have to agree that they won't concentrate poverty or people of color. They also agree to identify and break down barriers to housing choice.

Instead, The Oregonian's investigation found:

- Home Forward presided over a huge shift in the use of Section 8 vouchers, which help pay the rent, to neighborhoods east of 82nd Avenue. Of 2,071 vouchers added from 2001 to 2011, a net 93 percent ended up being used east of 82nd. African Americans in particular moved east at far higher rates than whites.
- The agency repeatedly violated its own policy on not placing Section 8 units it directly controls in neighborhoods where 20 percent or more of the population lives below the federal poverty line.
- Home Forward sold off more than 150 family homes and duplexes, nearly its entire inventory of such properties, many in desirable inner-eastside neighborhoods. It then added 70 family-size units -- all in Rockwood, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the region.
- The agency did not track patterns by race or ethnicity, so trends went not only uncorrected but unnoticed.

"You're right," said Lee Moore, a Home Forward board member, when presented The Oregonian's findings. "I think you have to go back and review those decisions and look at the environment and the circumstances that you're currently in and say, first of all, is this a good or a bad thing? Is this something that we're causing or not? Is this something that we can help or not? And maybe you then begin to make a different set of decisions."

A shift east

The Oregonian's Section 8 analysis found a major shift east in the 10 years leading to 2011, particularly for African American voucher-holders.

The program increased from 6,439 participants to 8,510. Those living east of 82nd Avenue grew by 1,929, or 93 percent of the net gain. By 2011, half of the county's vouchers were used east of 82nd, up from one-third in 2001.

For just six ZIP codes straddling east Portland and west Gresham, where nearly all of that growth occurred, the number of black voucher-holders tripled, to 1,193. And the share of the county's black voucher-holders living in those ZIP codes increased from 21 percent to 43 percent.

At the same time, the number of Latino voucher-holders more than doubled, to 164. The share of Latinos increased 9 percentage points, to 36 percent. The rate for whites grew by only 6 percentage points in the ZIP codes, to 38 percent, but that's in large part because whites held two-thirds of the vouchers there to begin with.

Portland's eastside neighborhoods west of 82nd, meanwhile, lost more than 400 vouchers over the decade even as their rental stock increased.

"It's fair to say that the growth of the program has predominately happened east. There's no doubt about that," said Steve Rudman, the executive director of Home Forward (formerly the Housing Authority of Portland) since 2001.

"Clearly there's some concern, if the trend continues, in terms of what seems to be less choice for African

Locked out

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Americans."

Data for 2012 show that across the Section 8 program, more than half of vouchers are used in census tracts where at least 20 percent live below the poverty line. Black and Latino voucher-holders are twice as likely as whites to live in neighborhoods with minority concentrations.

Section 8 rejection

Why is this happening? In theory, Section 8 gives residents a choice. They can live anywhere a landlord agrees to take their voucher. But in practice, participants say, it's not that easy.

For starters, not everyone who qualifies for the poorest-of-the-poor income guidelines gets a voucher. Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties have a combined 12,500 voucher-holders, but more than 8,000 are on waiting lists and more are waiting to join a waiting list.

In seminars, Home Forward tells voucher-holders to be choosy. A slide show highlights the better housing and schools in lower-poverty areas. "Don't be intimidated," the presentation says. "Take your time and find the right landlord."

But landlords can freely reject Section 8 renters, out of fear that residents will trash their unit, reluctance to deal with government regulations or any reason at all. And participants have just 60 days to find a rental or the voucher can go to someone else.

Green said trying to find a landlord was discouraging. Her move marked her second shift east since entering the program six years ago.

She liked her first place, a duplex on a quiet cul-de-sac a block west of 82nd. After the landlord decided to sell, she scrambled and found a three-story townhouse near Southeast 122nd Avenue and Ramona Street. The home, among 30 crammed onto less than two acres, has no yard, just a pit of bark dust.

Green moved to the house on Division Street after being rejected in inner Southeast Portland, Southwest Portland, Beaverton and Hillsboro, among other places.

"It's very depressing," said Green, who plans to begin a pre-pharmacy program at Mt. Hood Community College this summer. "It kind of makes you feel like you want to give up and you can't make it."

"It is what it is"

Home Forward officials largely blame market forces for the patterns. They

Section 8

History: President Richard Nixon launched the program in 1974, with congressional approval, beginning a long shift toward privatizing the nation's affordable housing. Rather than placing poor families in government-owned buildings, Section 8 offers a payment voucher and, in theory, lets recipients choose where to live.

Scope: More than 2.2 million U.S. households receive annual rent subsidies through the \$18 billion U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development program, the nation's largest housing program for low-income families. Locally, housing agencies in Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties serve about 12,500 households. Almost 8,200 more are on waiting lists, which are closed to new applicants.

Income guidelines: By law, the housing agencies provide at least three-quarters of vouchers to families or individuals who are very poor: making 30 percent of the median family income or less, which is \$15,350 for an

note that landlords in desirable areas can charge higher rents and easily turn away Section 8. That's why, they said, voucher use fell on the inner east side and surged east of 82nd.

Asked whether Home Forward anticipated the shift, Rudman responded:

"Expect? Hope for? Want? It is what it is."

But the agency could have taken steps to maintain access in desirable areas. And this year, it has.

First, officials didn't increase voucher values on the inner east side even as statistics showed voucher use there was steadily falling. They say rents there were affordable until recently and, to help as many people as possible, they kept payments lower than the maximum allowed.

This past March, the agency raised voucher payments for one- and two-bedroom units on the inner east side by up to 14 percent, to \$750 and \$950. Officials estimate the increase will eat up about \$1.3 million over three years, meaning about 180 fewer families will get help.

Home Forward leaders also told federal Housing and Urban Development officials in February 2009 that they would increase the number of participating landlords. But by June 2010, they reported that overall participation dropped from 3,166 landlords to 2,704, and that landlords joining the program dipped from 424 to 291 compared with the same 12 months a year earlier.

Things didn't improve. In June 2011, the agency decided not to report on new landlords. The overall number had dropped again, to 2,634. So this past February, the agency opted to pay new landlords in low-poverty tracts a \$100 bonus for each voucher they accept.

Finally, the agency did not analyze its own data to identify geographic trends among African American, Latino or other residents. Fair housing law requires agencies to identify and take steps to break down barriers based on race and ethnicity. But in a joint 2011 report with Portland, Gresham and Multnomah County, officials offered no racial analysis of the Section 8 program. In the agency's administrative plan, which took effect in April, officials listed steps they plan to take but didn't identify barriers.

"If you wanted to be reasonable," said Jill Riddle, Home Forward's Section 8 program director, "you could read every one of these ways that we're addressing them and write down what the impediment is right down next to it."

Policy ignored

individual or \$21,900 for a family of four.

How it works: Voucher-holders must find a landlord to accept them. In Oregon, landlords can freely turn down Section 8 applicants. Voucher-holders have 60 days to find a unit or request an extension, or the voucher can go to someone else. Generally, tenants pay about 30 percent of their income for rent and utilities; the voucher covers the rest. Most vouchers are issued to people, but some are assigned to projects and stay with the building when a tenant leaves.

Amounts: Local housing authorities set the voucher's amount using a fair-market scale established by federal officials. A voucher for a two-bedroom unit in Portland, for instance, generally covers \$832 a month. In Clackamas County, it covers \$850, though officials can set it anywhere from \$802 to \$980.

Learn more: Home Forward (Multnomah County), homeforward.org or 503-802-8300; Housing Authority of Clackamas County, clackamas.us/hacc or 503-655-8267; Washington County Housing Services, www.co.washington.or.us/Housing or 503-846-4794

-- Brad Schmidt

A similar picture emerged when The Oregonian analyzed the Section 8 units Home Forward controls.

Almost one-fifth of the agency's 8,500 vouchers are assigned to properties, not people. These "project-based" vouchers generally go to the chronically homeless or others unlikely to find anything else.

Under federal regulations, these vouchers, too, should aim to disperse poverty and expand housing and economic opportunities. Home Forward's own policy says such units, unless granted an exception, may not be in neighborhoods where 20 percent or more of the population lives below the poverty line.

But of Home Forward's roughly 1,300 project-based units, about 80 percent are in neighborhoods exceeding that level. Agency officials acknowledged that they don't follow the policy or have an exception process. Instead, they coordinate decisions with city and county leaders to place housing close to services, often downtown, and to help get projects off the ground.

For example, Home Forward kicked in vouchers to help two projects pencil out: its own 130-unit Bud Clark Commons in Old Town, a project heavily favored by Portland officials; and a Portland-backed 209-unit project for veterans in the South Waterfront.

The agency also tagged vouchers to help Multnomah County turn the former Martha Washington Hotel downtown into low-income housing.

"We have some powerful partners that ask -- that suggest -- where those should go," said Harriet Cormack, Home Forward's board chairwoman. "Like the Martha Washington. We got recruited by the county to come and save their ass."

Rockwood units

The agency does not have an impressive record on family-size units, either.

Home Forward owns about 5,600 units of public and affordable housing; about 2,100 have two or more bedrooms. Of those, 50 percent are east of 82nd Avenue and 35 percent are in North Portland. All told, 69 percent are in areas where more than 20 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, 9 percentage points higher than the rate for smaller apartments.

Martha Garrido, a 36-year-old single mother of boys ages 9 and 3, moved from a public housing complex not far from 82nd -- and a parade of prostitutes -- to one on Southeast 136th Avenue near Powell Boulevard.

Briefly

Section 8 survey: Most Section 8 recipients who moved in 2011 like where they live, according to a recent Home Forward survey.

According to the survey of 197 voucher-holders, completed in January by the Survey Research Lab at Portland State University, 70 percent agreed with the statement: "I was able to move into the neighborhood I really wanted to live in."

The survey did not identify the neighborhoods, however.

More than 28 percent of voucher-holders disagreed. They cited a lack of suitable units, a dislike of Section 8 recipients by landlords and rent being too high. Nearly all said their preferred neighborhood would have put them closer to amenities, family and friends; and offered better transportation options, stronger schools and a safer area. The survey also didn't identify their preferred neighborhoods.

When moving, voucher-holders were essentially split between picking a neighborhood first and then looking for a unit versus looking at units in many neighborhoods and then picking the best unit.

Sixty-three percent of those surveyed lived east of 82nd Avenue, and 42 percent were African American. More than three-fourths were women, and nearly all had a gross annual income below \$25,000. Answers were not matched to demographic characteristics.

Redevelopment projects: Home Forward is well-known for

But two years on, she's not sure it's better. Her tidy two-bedroom apartment, with a newly renovated kitchen, feels like home. She's also grateful for the assistance: She pays about \$500 a month at Townhouse Terrace, well below the going rate. But vandals have smashed in her car windows three times.

"My kids, they're growing up, and it's not safe," said Garrido, who works full time at a Tualatin food warehouse. "Here is a bad area for families."

Home Forward spokeswoman Shelley Marchesi said public housing was built decades ago. "It's just a historical question," she said.

But that's not the whole story. In 2007, the agency began selling 153 family homes and duplexes after concluding that maintaining scattered units was too expensive. Half were on Portland's inner east side, about one-quarter in North Portland and one-fifth in east Portland.

Officials said it was one of the most painful decisions they've ever made. They gave most ousted tenants Section 8 vouchers and vowed to replace every unit.

And they did -- but disregarded size and location. They used the money to help build 75 studio or one-bedroom units downtown. The rest? Officials transferred subsidies to 25 units in a Rockwood apartment complex they owned, then approached the owners of another Rockwood complex, now called Madrona Place Apartments, and bought it to add 45 units, most with three bedrooms.

With that purchase, the agency placed public housing in a census tract that has a poverty rate of nearly 35 percent. The tract is also one of nine in the region where people of color are the majority. The area's ZIP code has the region's highest number of Section 8 voucher-holders.

"That's definitely problematic," said Lisa Bates, a professor at the Toulon School of Urban Studies & Planning at Portland State University. "It does not comport with their other goals, which is to invest in opportunity areas."

But Rudman, the Home Forward director, said the complex was all the agency could afford.

"We think we're stabilizing and revitalizing the neighborhood," he said. "We're a good landlord. People are already there, in dire need. It's not like we're bringing people in. They're there."

No dining room

its redevelopment projects, including New Columbia in North Portland.

The agency reopened the site, formerly called Columbia Villa, in 2006 with more than 600 low-income rentals and 225 homes on 82 acres. In 2008, it redeveloped another North Portland project into 130-unit Humboldt Gardens.

Home Forward's third project will remake the Hillsdale Terrace public housing complex in Southwest Portland. The renamed Stephens Creek Crossing will more than double the number of subsidized rental units, to 122, in part using money from selling 153 homes.

Rent disparity: A 2011 study funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that African American voucher-holders paid more in rent than white ones. In addition, the study found that the Portland metro area is one of two in the nation where African Americans paid even more from 2000-02 if they lived in a very white neighborhood.

"I'd be reluctant to say this is evidence or proof of discrimination," said Dirk Early, a professor at Southwestern University in Texas, who conducted the study. "If nothing else, Portland should be aware of the results and be a bit more mindful."

-- Brad Schmidt

Back at Green's new home on Southeast Division, a tour hardly ventured beyond the living room.

"This is the whole place. Bedroom No. 1," she said, gesturing to a room off the entry. "Bedroom No. 2. Bedroom No. 3. The bathroom. No dining room; I'm going to have to create one."

Now that she has her yard, she's coming to terms with the move. Her new neighborhood has more poverty than her old one, and her kids will attend schools that have been sanctioned for missing federal performance targets.

Green points out how odd it is that, when she grew up, her parents had a Section 8 voucher and wanted to move east of 82nd. Now the homes they rented near Northeast Sixth Avenue and Beech Street in the King neighborhood and 17th Avenue and Emerson Street in the Vernon neighborhood belong to a world she would like to recapture but can't.

"I would love to. I would absolutely love to," she said of living in spruced-up neighborhoods where she now feels like an outsider. "It's beautiful. But I felt like why couldn't the change happen when we petitioned for it? Nobody I know lives there now."

-- **Brad Schmidt**

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