

Housing authority freezes Section 8 wait list

KING COUNTY | Faced with financial hardship, the agency recently stopped taking new participants into its tenant voucher program.

BY TAN VINH
Seattle Times staff reporter

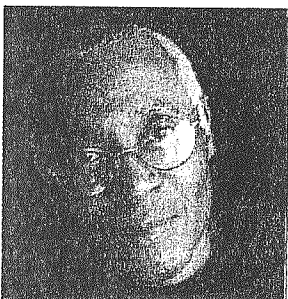
After two years on a waiting list, retired Seattle school-bus driver Henry Louis Ford expected to receive the coveted housing vouchers that would loosen his tight budget enough to put his food-bank days behind him.

The 63-year-old Ford, a Vietnam veteran who lives in senior housing in Kent, told friends that it would be nice to shop more frequently at grocery stores.

But the King County Housing Authority, facing financial hardships of its own, recently stopped taking new participants into the Section 8 Tenant Voucher program, which assists the county's neediest residents.

"I'm real sad about it," said Ford, who won't get housing vouchers this year. "I'm on a fixed income. That was going to help me a lot."

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ity will send notices to more than 5,000 seniors, disabled people, single parents and refugees on the wait list to inform them that, at least in the foreseeable future, they will not begin receiving rent subsidies as they had hoped.

The King County Housing Authority covers the entire county, excluding the cities of Seattle and Renton.

The decision to freeze the Section 8 wait list — the first time King County has done so since the federal program began under the Nixon administration — came after the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development in January allocated \$60 million to the King County Housing Authority — \$3.5 million less than expected.

Hardest hit is the Section 8 tenant program, which allows recipients, many on the verge of being homeless, to pay part of their rent in private housing with a voucher. How much each recipient is allotted depends largely on income.

The crisis mirrors problems facing many housing authorities across the Northwest, where federal funding has not kept pace with rent increases. Also, a growing indigent population has stressed the voucher program.

In a Section 8 program administered through the Seattle Housing Authority, more than 7,000 poor families have been stranded on a wait list since early last year.

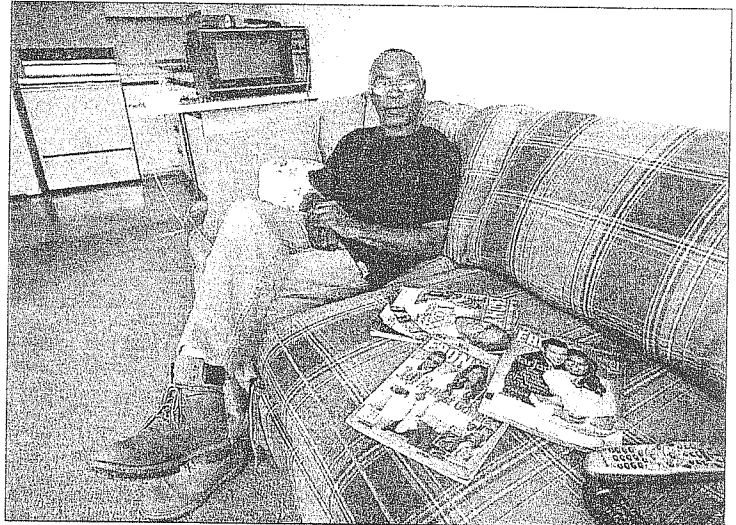
In Tacoma, no one has gotten off the Section 8 wait list since November 2001; in Portland, since 2003. The move is expected to increase the demand for public housing and homeless shelters, several local housing experts said.

But by turning away new participants, King County Housing Authority officials said they will save enough money to honor vouchers for the 6,700 families already in Section 8.

"It's important to help additional families, but our first priority is that nobody currently in the program loses housing," said Stephen Norman, the housing authority's executive director.

Still, those already in the program will be affected. Effective immediately, Section 8 families must pay for any rent increases landlords impose this year. The authority also has tightened occupancy standards — a single parent with two children of different genders now qualifies for a two-bedroom apartment, instead of a three-bedroom apartment.

If the authority's funds are still short, it will impose a monthly surcharge — perhaps \$10 or \$20 — on families, housing officials said.



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Henry Louis Ford, 63, who lives in senior housing in Kent, said he has been on the wait list for the county's Section 8 Tenant Voucher program for more than two years. "I'm on a fixed income," he said. "That was going to help me a lot."

For those trying to get into the program, "It's very discouraging because we had been waiting so long. It feels like the rug is being pulled from underneath us," said Connie Viles of Issaquah, who has been on the wait list since 2002.

Viles, 50, who was once homeless, can't work due to vertigo caused by Meniere's disease. She receives \$170 a month in food stamps, and the \$866 she receives in child support goes toward the \$800 rent for the two-bedroom apartment she shares with her teenage son, her granddaughter and another homeless teen.

In Tukwila, Suatai Faalelea, 45, was banking on the vouchers to free up her budget enough to catch up on her utility bills, for which she is two months behind. A janitor who makes \$7.35 an hour at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, Faalelea supports two daughters, a grandson, a nephew and her husband, who is blind from diabetes.

Ford had been told earlier that he'd likely be receiving Section 8 help later this year. Now, being shut out of the program means he must keep making do on food stamps and a \$675 a month Social Security check, of which \$480 goes for rent.

"Now I'm just very devastated," he said. "What do I do now?"

Tan Vinh: 206-515-5656 or
tvinh@seattletimes.com