

Sarasota Housing Authority opens waiting list for Section 8 vouchers

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In time to help address a major housing crisis, the Sarasota Housing Authority has opened its waiting list for Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers.

The window to fill out an online pre-application for the program's waiting list opened at noon Friday, April 1, and will remain open through noon April 18.

Applicants can access and complete the online pre-application to get on the waiting list at sarasotahousing.org.

After the deadline, the housing authority will use a lottery system to randomly choose 1,250 applicants for the actual waiting list for the Housing Choice Voucher, or HCV, which assists tenants with a share of their rent in privately owned properties in the community.

Housing authority officials expect to be able to issue vouchers right away to between 50 and 100 families. The rest of the 1,250 who make it onto the list could be waiting several years before receiving a voucher, though the authority hopes to start working with at least 500 families in the next six months to start the eligibility screening process.

"The timing is good because the need is greater than it has been in perhaps 20 years or more," said William Russell, president and CEO of the housing authority. The last time the Sarasota Housing Authority opened its Housing Choice Voucher waiting list was 2019, when about 9,000 applicants vied for 1,500 spots, officials said.

Russell expects the number of applicants to far exceed those in 2019, due to the lack of affordable housing options and one of the highest rates of rental increases in the country.

"People are reaching out to us every day, left and right," he said. "It's nice that some of those people can put in an application and can get some assistance. Unfortunately, it won't be enough."

One thing that could make a big difference is if more private landlords came forward, willing to accept the vouchers, he said, stressing that the process is a simple one for landlords.

Currently, there are 541 private landlords with whom the authority works that are receiving the Housing Choice Vouchers, which are separate from project-based voucher programs.

"We are tremendously grateful to landlords who have and are willing to lease to our families who have a voucher," Russell said of the private market. "We can have all the vouchers in the world, but if we don't have landlords willing to accept them, then we can't house anybody. They are absolutely critical."

Even when landlords are willing to take the vouchers, in some cases the rent amount exceeds what the authority is able to pay within HUD guidelines for a region's fair-market rent. (Voucher holders pay only 30% of their income toward the rent.) Given the Sarasota area's especially high spike in rents, the housing authority asked for and received a waiver to go even higher than the limit HUD had established for it, starting in February.

"They are going to get at or at least close to a market rent," Russell, said, referring to private landlords. "But on top of that they are housing a family that truly has a significant affordability struggle."

And those families are many. The area's biggest employers – from the service industry, to the hospital, schools and manufacturing – have all reported difficulty retaining or recruiting employees because of the area's high housing costs.

While the Sarasota County Commission this week agreed to allocate \$25 million of federal pandemic relief funds to help build almost 700 affordable housing units, the construction of those units could take several years and only scratches the surface of an overwhelming need.

By contrast, additional private landlords accepting the Section 8 vouchers could bring more immediate help to many struggling families and residents – including those who wish to stay in their current homes but with assistance from the voucher, Russell said.

"It's pretty impactful when we get landlords who agree to do that."

This story comes from a partnership between the Sarasota Herald-Tribune and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Sandra Amrhein covers the Season of Sharing campaign, along with issues surrounding housing, utilities, child care and transportation in the area. She can be reached at samrhein@gannett.com.

Interested?

Applicants can access and complete the online pre-application to get on the waiting list at sarasotahousing.org.

Those without computer access can request a paper pre-application by writing to: HCF Application, 269 S. Osprey Ave., Suite 100, Sarasota, FL 34236. The paper application must be completed and returned by mail, postmarked no later than April 14.