



## **Section 8 Snub: Jeff Parish gave short notice when its rental voucher list opened, leaving little time for those in need to apply**

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Laura Tuggle received unusual news on the morning of Nov. 24. The Jefferson Parish Housing Authority had opened its Section 8 rental voucher waiting list.

Tuggle, head of housing at Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, can't remember the last time that happened. But the pleasant surprise created a crisis.

That's because the list would close in six days, on Nov. 30. And Tuggle's office would shut down the next day at 2 p.m. for Thanksgiving. That didn't leave much time to spread the word.

"Oh, thank God the waiting list is opening," Tuggle recalled thinking when she saw the e-mail. "And, 'Oh my God, it's closing!'"

She was already a day behind. The waiting list actually opened the previous day, but nobody knew about it — except those who caught a miniscule legal notice on the back of the Times-Picayune sports page.

Other housing advocates, such as the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center and Unity of Greater New Orleans, could have helped to channel the information. But these organizations didn't receive the notice. So, as many people prepared for a four-day weekend, Tuggle scrambled to contact an entire region of service providers and people in need.

"I was just so frazzled," Tuggle said. "You didn't have the time to marshal any resources."

JPHA did not return several calls seeking comment.

Department of Housing and Urban Development regulations require that, beyond general circulation newspapers, housing authorities publicize waiting list openings in "minority media and other suitable means." HUD spokeswoman Donna White downplayed the regulation.

"We generally look more at the circulation of the publication," White said, adding that the department does not get involved with housing authorities' day-to-day operations.

The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center did not learn of the opening until Nov. 30, the day it closed, said Interim Co-Director Seth Weingart.

"A more fair process would be, for one, putting out actual advertisements," Weingart said,

“not just a legal notice.”

Weingart said the procedure was “designed in a way that excludes people,” particularly those without Internet access. It’s questionable whether pre-applying for the waiting list could have occurred through any means other than JPHA’s Web site.

Requests for pre-applications and completed pre-applications required postmarking in the one-week time frame, and in-person deliveries were not accepted, according to JPHA’s Web site.

For those without Internet access, multiple rounds of mailings were required during a week when the JPHA office was closed for two days.

“Doing outreach to people who are literally homeless and unsheltered, that was out of the question,” Unity Executive Director Martha Kegel said.

Kegel is also concerned that a low-level response will inaccurately represent the level of need, especially in the post-Hurricane Katrina rental landscape. Opening a waiting list can ignite an overwhelming response, but advocates can leverage the disparity between need and resources, Kegel said.

“You get a much better sense of how many people are out there,” Kegel said. “And then we can go and advocate for more resources.”

More than 20,000 households earning less than 80 percent of median income, along with almost 10,000 homeless individuals and families, comprise the metro area’s demand for subsidized housing, according to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. Additionally, 31 percent of renters in 2008 spent more than half of gross earnings on rent and utilities.

It’s difficult to pinpoint when and why Section 8 waiting lists open. But at least one factor is important: the availability of HUD-funded vouchers.

JPHA in August received 500 vouchers, worth almost \$6 million, as part of a congressional appropriation for renters impacted by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Jefferson Parish received the largest of 59 disbursements to local housing authorities.

The appropriation prioritizes residents with expiring FEMA assistance, and HUD required a yearlong waiting list in these circumstances. The housing authority’s Web site says “everyone in this profile” may continue to apply “until which time JPHA determines it has given adequate time.”

White said HUD is not concerned about the one-year requirement, so long as there is a “reasonable” amount of time. But White said the timing of the opening was unfortunate.

“Opening a waiting list during a week that is almost considered half a week is probably not the most ideal time,” she said.

Tuggle said she submitted close to 50 pre-applications on her clients' behalf by the deadline.

They included Felicia Jackson, who, along with three adolescent children and a toddler grandchild, was recently evicted from a Slidell Street house in New Orleans.

"We were trying to reach her desperately," Tuggle said.

Jackson finally called back at 2 p.m. on deadline day, and Tuggle submitted Jackson's pre-application with about 15 minutes to spare.

Jackson said she lived in the Slidell Street house for six months but could not afford the \$700 rent without a job. She had to quit her last job because her car broke down, she said, and she raced to find a new one before rent was due.

"I went to fast food restaurants, hotels, I even tried the ferry," Jackson said. "I knew I wasn't going to get a job quick enough to pay the \$700."

Jackson and her family have been staying with friends since the eviction. She finally found a job at a restaurant, but it pays \$7.50 an hour and didn't start until today, she said.

"I will not be able to survive without the Section 8 voucher," Jackson said.

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