



Saturday, December 26, 2009

Vouchers steer poor to troubled areas; Section 8 may concentrate poverty

By Katy Reckdahl
Staff writer

While housing officials have for years touted the demolition of the public housing complexes as a way to "deconcentrate" poverty in New Orleans, a study released this week by the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center shows that public housing residents who use Section 8 vouchers are still likely to live in the city's most troubled neighborhoods. Leaders in New Orleans had expressed hope that clearing most of the vast brick public housing communities would put an end to what a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development fact sheet described as "the old paradigm of concentrating families in islands of poverty." Researchers believe that concentrated poverty isolates poor residents from opportunity and services, leading to higher crime rates, joblessness, failing schools and ill health. Brookings Institution analysts call this a "double burden": Families with little money find their struggles exacerbated when they live in areas of concentrated poverty.

But whether former public housing residents find expanded opportunity in their new homes depends largely on the Housing Authority of New Orleans' Section 8 program, because most of the city's former public housing residents either moved into remaining public-housing complexes or received Section 8 vouchers, which helps families pay rent for apartments secured on the private market.

HANO, which has been under the management of a new HUD "fix-it" team didn't attempt to defend itself, but instead said through new director David Gilmore that the voucher program at HANO "is, without question, broken." The new team hasn't had a chance to fully examine the report, Gilmore said, but "if it is accurate, then it is further evidence of the problems within the (Section 8 voucher) program and the need to correct them."

At HANO, like other housing authorities across the country, Section 8 vouchers have become the dominant form of housing assistance, taking the place of public housing. Twenty years ago, HANO's inventory included more than 10,000 public housing apartments in traditional complexes like the Desire, Florida, Fischer, St. Thomas and the recently demolished "Big Four": B.W. Cooper, C.J. Peete, Lafitte and St. Bernard. HANO now has only one large traditional development left, the Iberville, where more than 300 of the 852 apartments are mothballed while a citizens committee weighs the complex's future.

Instead, HANO now oversees 16,000 vouchers, nearly double its pre-Katrina totals. This dramatic shift from public housing apartments to vouchers "put heavier emphasis on the Section 8 program, " making it more important to evaluate how well it's working and what can be done to make it better, said Kate Scott, interim co-director of the Fair Housing Action Center. In an August report, the Fair Housing Action Center found that many New Orleans landlords refuse to rent to families with Section 8 vouchers. As an extension of those findings, the center, along with the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University, mapped two-bedroom apartments owned by "Section 8 friendly" landlords, which offered the rentals to voucher holders through listings maintained on the Housing Authority of New Orleans Web site.

The two agencies then overlaid those apartments over a map of New Orleans census tracts ranked by opportunity. Of the five tiers of "opportunity" available in the city, the darkest tracts ostensibly offer high opportunity to residents while the lightest tracts offer little opportunity, based on indicators for education, the economy, housing, health and the environment. The highest-opportunity census tracts were reasonably close to jobs, health care, park, grocery stores and "acceptably performing schools" with open enrollment. Better tracts also had higher median home values and lower apartment-vacancy rates, were less likely to have flooded after the 2005 levee breaks, and had fewer serious crimes and foreclosures per household. The result: More than 60 percent of Section 8 apartments were in the two lowest-opportunity tracts. Certainly, a child could live next door to a high-performing school with open enrollment and still not be able to get in or could live in a pocket of unemployment near a wealth of jobs. But in the changing landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans, it seemed best to use this set of indicators to gauge opportunity, said Scott, noting that the center will release a new version once data is available from the 2010 U.S. Census. This is not a problem unique to New Orleans. Researchers and housing advocates have asked HUD to pay more attention to families who leave public housing and to modify Section 8 policies to more effectively help families move to better areas and to reach out to landlords with properties in better areas and maintaining their participation through efficient programs.

Scott believes that some of this can be placed on HANO's shoulders, because of its poor administration of the program. Landlords with better options have shied away from the program because it's been slow to pay rent and has a Section 8 staff that is "hard-to-reach, discourteous, slow and unhelpful, " according to the center's August report. This makes it less likely for voucher holders to find decent housing in nice neighborhoods, Scott said, defeating the purpose of vouchers, which were designed to help low-income tenants rent property in safer, more moderate-income, racially diverse neighborhoods.

Scott will find no argument from HANO on this. "Ultimately, the objective is to maximize housing choice for voucher holders, " Gilmore said, pledging that HANO would "tirelessly work toward" that goal.

..... Katy Reckdahl can be reached at kreckdahl@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3396.