INVESTIGATIONS

Section 8 sold short: Pittsburgh housing authority's mishandling of vouchers repels landlords, imperils tenants

"Not only is HACP not effectively preventing evictions, it's contributing to people becoming unhoused and couldn't be complicit in that anymore," said Tammy Thompson, a former housing authority board member.

Eric Jankiewicz April 5, 2021

Left: Donald Phillips, left, Rising Tide Partners's executive director, and Dan Long, one of the organization's Section 8 clients, stand outside of Long's Hazelwood home on Saturday, April 3. Top: A house on 5th Ave. in Lower Lawrenceville, Pittsburgh. Bottom: A house on Jancey Street in Hazelwood. Both houses are occupied by Section 8 tenants and are owned by people in the Hazelwood area who have filed complaints against the housing authority for rental through the Rising Tide Partners program. | Photo by Eric Jankiewicz

As Pittsburgh's housing authority prioritizes building and renovating its a mixture of public and private redevelopments, housing advocates and others say the core is a diminished and largely ignored Housing Choice Voucher program that leaves thousands on waiting lists.

While tenants and landlords have long grumbled about the program, people recently associated with the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh (HACP) are also coming forward to decry its ineffectiveness.

On Feb. 2, a former HACP staffer filed a complaint against the authority to the Pennsylvania Department of State. Da-Sonn Vaughn, the former primary administrator of the authority's Homeownership Program, is now a real estate agent and landlord. She wrote in an email to the department that HACP "does not adhere to basic business standards, which places vulnerable populations at risk of homelessness" including when it failed to pay one of her tenants' rent through the voucher program, also known as Section 8.

"The gross negligence and mismanagement of this agency in regards to the administration of this federally funded program and others has fueled the affordable housing crisis that the City of Pittsburgh faces," she wrote in an email to the department.

The Office of State Inspector General responded, saying that they did not have "investigative authority over the issues" and that they were referring her complaint to the HACP board.

While some would blame the city's housing problems on a few stock of affordable housing or stigma against accepting Section 8 voucher holders, several landlords, tenants and former housing authority personnel are pointing at the authority's management.

With its high staff turnover, the housing authority has a pattern of not returning calls or emails and failing to pay rent to landlords who have accepted Section 8 vouchers, they say.

For years, housing advocates have questioned how HACP runs its voucher program. As part of HACP's special designation as one of HUD's Moving to Work (MTW) agencies, the authority is able to redirect federal funds from vouchers to housing developments. The agency has argued that construction of new housing is more effective than issuing more vouchers.

"Unfortunately, our condition in this city is such that if I release 100 vouchers, only 35% will get filled," said Carter Bronson, HACP's executive director. In a recent interview, he acknowledged that of interest had compounded efforts to improve the voucher program, but said recent hires and training should help.

[redacted]

Bronson added, though, that rising rents have made it harder for the authority to compete in the rental market because landlords can make more by market-rate rents than they would from a voucher. Instead of funding vouchers, Bronson said the authority has raised a cause, 100 units by investing more than $14 million since he started as director in 2015.

"The more the voucher program falls," Vaughn said, "the more development they can do and nobody is watching. The money doesn't disappear, it goes into another development," she said, referring to HACP budget flexibility. "This is coming at the cost of tenants losing their apartments. Landlords don't get payments, and they don't stick it out. They're forced to fix their tenants go."

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'We need the housing authority to pay rent'

One nonprofit housing agency is holding out hope that they won't have to evict some Section 8 tenants despite not receiving rental payments from HACP sometimes for years.

On Feb. 21, the nonprofit Rising Tide Partners wrote a letter to HACP's Chief Operating Officer Marsha Grayson, asking her to have the authority pay back rent owed in relation to Section 8 tenants.

The letter noted that Rising Tide hadn't received payments for many of their voucher holders in the last two years.

In one case, Rising Tide wrote to Grayson, one of their tenants "has filled out paperwork requested by Section 8 at least five separate times. She has received no response about submitted paperwork, but does have received additional requests for paperwork. She has had at least three different workers during this time period."

"No landlord would put up with that and even for [Rising Tide], it's starting to burn our operations," said Tammy Thompson, a board member of Rising Tide with insider knowledge of HACP.

Thompson, who is executive director of the nonprofit Catapult Greater Pittsburgh, sat on the HACP's board from 2020 to 2022. She said she stepped down last year out of frustration with what the one as disorganization in the Section 8 program and a refusal from HACP's leadership to address concerns and issues.

"I felt like I was being complicit in what the housing authority is contributing to this homelessness crisis," Thompson said about her time with HACP. "Not only is [HACP] not effectively housing people, it's contributing to people becoming unhoused and I couldn't be complicit in that anymore."

Kendall Pelling, Rising Tide's executive director, said he recently met with HACP leadership to discuss the payment issues. Pelling said HACP appeared to be willing to resolve the outstanding balance.

"We need, as a nonprofit landlord, to get rent or we won't survive and our properties won't stay affordable," Pelling said. "We need the housing authority to pay rent. It's the only way affordable housing works."

Payment delays lender landlords from Section 8

Households with vouchers pay 30% of their income toward rent and utilities, with the balance covered by the authority. Every year, several thousand people in Pittsburgh rely on the program to help pay rent. Thousands more wait on a list in hopes of getting future assistance.

HACP has 5,198 households, totaling 11,767 people, with active vouchers. There are more than 20,000 households on HACP's voucher waiting lists, though that does not necessarily mean there are that many unique applicants, as people can be on waiting lists for vouchers that follow the tenant, or vouchers attached to specific properties. Housing authorities are required by law to provide "75% of vouchers to applicants with incomes no higher than 30% of the area median income.

The Downtown offices for the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh, as pictured on Thursday, March 30, 2021. | Photo by Stephanie Strasburg

But landlords warn that it is becoming harder for voucher holders to find landlords willing to deal with HACP's delays in payments.

Robert Uttar is the president of Uttar Investments, a residential and commercial real estate company, and he said he does not no longer take tenants who have vouchers from HACP. He prefers to deal with the Allegheny County Housing Authority (ACHA), which operates throughout the county. Uttar said he has 70 units that get vouchers through the county housing authority and another 20 units getting vouchers through the city's.

"The chasm between the two housing authorities is massive," Uttar said. "ACHA's the gold standard for Section 8. HACP is abysmal, or insert whatever antonym concerns. They're awful to deal with."

Uttar said HACP takes weeks or months to complete every step necessary for a tenant with a voucher to move into one of his apartments.

"On average, I need to email [HACP] like 15 times to get a response," Uttar said. "That doesn't happen with the county — nine times out of 10 they'll email me back the same day."

He said that if people leave HACP's employment, emails to those former employees don't get forwarded to active accounts. "So you never know if you're going to get a response."

Bronson said he sometimes has the opportunity to meet with landlords who aren't getting Section 8 rent funds on time. "Once I meet landlords with these complaints, they stay in the program," Bronson said.

But based on his experience with HACP tenants, Uttar said, "the issues with HACP are getting bare. I can't help tenants who have HACP. I try to get them into the county."

Vouchers are portable, allowing tenants to move between different housing authorities.

"Once they live out in the county for a year," said Uttar, "they can switch to an ACHA voucher and then move back into the city if they want."

Expired vouchers, unreturned calls

Tamika Johnson has qualified for a voucher, but nonetheless lives with her five children at a shelter in East Liberty.

Johnson said she lived in a city apartment from 2017 to 2020, thanks to a voucher through HACP. Since 2020, though, a series of problems — a failed housing inspection, difficulty finding a landlord, the fact that vouchers lapse if not used in 90 days — have hampered her search for housing.

She said she filed one grievance with the authority and, with the help of a shelter caseworker, has called and emailed repeatedly seeking clarity on the status of her voucher.

"They don't respond to me at all. It's like I don't exist," she said.

That's why she's living in a shelter.

She said her children can't stay at the shelter while she's at work, requiring her to get child care for her younger kids.

A typical day for Johnson involves taking the kids to school early in the morning and going to work. During her work day, she has to leave work to pick them up and take her youngest children to a babysitter for the remainder of her shift.

At the shelter, Johnson is not allowed to cook.

"When I'm done, we have to get dinner but the [shelter] cafeteria is already closed," Johnson said. Dinner is usually some kind of fast food.

"I can't take food inside the shelter, so we have to eat in the car," she said.

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Promised voucher investments derailed

"We've had to create affordable housing," Bronson said, referring to efforts like the Larimer Choice Neighborhood project and other similar initiatives. "We're taking voucher money to create affordable housing."

In 2020, [redacted] reported that HACP planned to "enhance the voucher program," but Bronson said last month that staffing shortages have hampered these efforts.

Bronson said the authority is "aggressively training our new staff."

> "Everybody is working hard but we're below the water right now. We know that."

HACP has 250 employees, about 108 of whom do maintenance-related work.

"We've had an influx of personnel," Bronson said, noting that they've hired "at least" eight new housing specialists to address the problem of people not getting their rental payments on time.

Bronson said they were also working with a consulting company "to supplement for the lack of staff we've had."

He added that HACP is moving their offices into a new building that will allow employees to work from the office and cut down on delays related to employees working remotely.

"Everybody is working hard but we're below the water right now," Bronson said. "We know that."

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This story was first checked by Jack Troy.

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Eric Jankiewicz is a reporter focused on housing and economic development [redacted]. A native New Yorker, Eric moved to Pittsburgh in 2017 and has since fallen in love with his adopted city, even... (more by Eric Jankiewicz)

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