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Housing advocates take issue with agency's notion of family

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Housing advocates oppose public housing officials' plan to define a family as a single person or people related by marriage, birth or court-awarded custody.

They say that definition excludes unrelated adults, people related by adoption and unmarried and same-sex couples.

Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority officials propose to add the definition to admission eligibility rules for its housing choice voucher program. That change and others in the rent subsidy program and the public housing program are in the authority's draft Agency Plan for 2006.

The plan sets the authority's goals and rules. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires authorities to submit a plan each year.

CMHA's board of commissioners will vote on the plan at its Oct. 5 meeting.

Deputy Executive Director Cathy Pennington, who oversees the voucher program, said the changes in that program would cut costs at a time when CMHA could face federal budget cuts. She said the changes are not designed to hurt the population CMHA serves.

But Peter Iskin, a lawyer for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland who handles housing issues, said several cost-cutting measures the board has approved in past years do not really benefit that population.

"The point of the program is to provide a reasonable subsidy for the individuals they serve," said Iskin, who also represented the Cleveland Tenants Organization at a brief public hearing on the plan Friday.

Iskin and Brian Davis, executive director for the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless, urged CMHA to rescind a rule giving preference for vouchers to working families. The authority added that rule for 2005.

Davis said the provision places an undue administrative burden on staff and is unfair to thousands of people who have waited for years for a voucher. But the measure cuts costs by giving vouchers to households that can afford to pay more rent.

Voucher holders pay 30 percent of their income toward the rent. The authority pays the landlord the rest.

Both Davis and Iskin continue to oppose the requirement that voucher holders, except those who are exempt, pay \$50 toward their monthly rent. They say the minimum rent requirement is a burden for poorer families.

But that requirement potentially saves thousands of dollars, Pennington said last year when the board adopted it for 2005.

Other proposals include reopening the voucher program waiting list during 2006 and adjusting the amount

