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CMHA program seeks landlords throughout county

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Local public-housing officials are asking landlords in Cuyahoga County to participate in a federal subsidy program for low-income renters.

The Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority would use money from its Housing Choice Voucher Program to subsidize rents for the apartments.

Under the program, tenants pay no more than 30 percent of their income toward their rent. The federal government pays the landlord the rest, through the housing authority.

"We're hoping to attract some owners in lower-poverty areas," said Cathy Pennington, a deputy executive director.

Pennington said putting clients in lower-poverty areas would help CMHA meet federal requirements to "deconcentrate," or disperse the renters so that not too many poor people live in any one area.

The apartments also could serve special populations, such as senior citizens or people with disabilities.

In this program, the apartment building is assigned the subsidy, as opposed to the individual renter's voucher plan.

The advantage is that because the building can remain subsidized for 10 to 15 years, renters are not in danger of losing their housing simply because a landlord chooses not to participate from year to year, said Peter Iskin, a Legal Aid Society of Cleveland lawyer who is a housing specialist.

"It locks units in for longer-term affordability," Pennington said.

When tenants hold the subsidy, in the form of vouchers, the landlord can refuse to renew their leases without cause.

Under the new program, generally only 25 percent of the units in a building can be subsidized, except in certain instances such as when a building has four or fewer units or when elderly or disabled tenants are involved. Waivers are possible in some situations.

The authorities can spend up to 20 percent of the money the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development gives them for vouchers on the new plan. The total CMHA voucher program budget for fiscal 2006 is more than \$94 million. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., estimates that 400,000 units nationwide could be subsidized this way.

Phil Star, director of the Center of Neighborhood Development at Cleveland State University's Levin College of Urban Affairs, was cautious about the plan. There are not enough vouchers to meet the public need, he said. Still, he said the plan might preserve affordable housing. Pennington said CMHA would not use a full 20 percent of its voucher money. It will decide based on the proposals. The submission deadline is June 21.

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