

HUD's Carson expected to ramp up public profile

Associated Press, by Jennifer C. Kerr, May 31, 2017

Photo Caption Excerpt - Carson was one of the biggest names to join Donald Trump's Cabinet, but since taking office about 100 days ago, he's kept a low public profile. That could change starting this week as he begins a series of appearances in Washington, giving him an opportunity to spell out a vision for the housing agency he leads and try to avoid the controversies that have stemmed from some of his early remarks.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ben Carson was one of the biggest names to join Donald Trump's Cabinet, but since taking office as housing secretary, Carson has mostly kept a low public profile. That could change starting this week.

Carson is beginning a series of appearances in Washington, giving him an opportunity to spell out a vision for the housing agency he leads — and to try to avoid the controversies that have stemmed from some of his early remarks as housing chief.

On Thursday, Carson will headline a homeownership conference at his agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Next week, he heads to Capitol Hill to testify before House and Senate panels about deep cuts planned for HUD in Trump's proposed budget.

It's a shift in visibility for the renowned neurosurgeon and former Republican presidential candidate as he nears 100 days in Trump's Cabinet.

Since taking the helm of HUD in March, Carson, 65, has visited a handful of cities as part of a national "listening tour" to talk to HUD employees, housing officials and public housing residents. He's also had appearances at some housing conferences — most of it with little or no advance notice to the media. So far, he has not shared publicly his policy agenda for the department.

HUD spokesman Raffi Williams says Carson is no longer a candidate running for political office and has been busy leading a \$40 billion federal agency that has more than 8,000 employees. "He's focused on governing and crafting policies that advance HUD's mission of creating strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all Americans," said Williams.

When Carson has discussed his views on government and housing policy, he's sparked some criticism. In his first full week on the job, Carson seemed to describe slaves as immigrants, saying — "there were other immigrants who came here on the bottom of slave ships, worked even longer, even harder for less."

Last week, on the radio show of close friend and conservative commentator Armstrong Williams, Carson said poverty is largely a "state of mind."

"You take somebody who has the right mindset, you can take everything from them and put them on the street and I guarantee you, in a little while, they'll be right back up there," Carson told Armstrong on his SiriusXM show. "And you take somebody with the wrong mindset, you can give them everything in the world and they'll work their way back down to the bottom."

The comments from Carson, who grew up poor in inner-city Detroit, stoked outrage on social media — coming from the head of an agency that provides millions of lower-income people with rental subsidies and other housing assistance.

But Rolf Pendall, co-director of a housing program at the Urban Institute think tank, isn't worried that Carson has "been given the mission of destroying the agency."

While not defending Carson's comments, Pendall said the housing chief's testimony during his January confirmation hearing shows "he clearly does think that HUD is part of the solution to urban problems, to rural problems, to housing problems in the United States, and that many of its programs have been effective in the past."

Carson's vision could become clearer when he testifies about the administration's proposed \$6 billion cut in the agency's \$47 billion budget.

Slated for elimination in the Trump budget are several housing support and community development programs, such as the \$3 billion Community Development Block Grant program. The plan also would cut about \$2 billion from the department's rental assistance programs, to \$35.2 billion. Rental assistance programs comprise about 80 percent of the agency's total funding.

New requirements to encourage work and self-sufficiency are part of the plan. One proposal would increase in the tenant contribution toward rent from 30 percent of adjusted income to up to 35 percent of gross income.

The cuts would be devastating, Pendall said: "People will lose housing vouchers. They will become homeless, and some of them will die."

Diane Yentel, president and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, says she wants to see Carson focus on programs with proven results — such as the Housing Trust Fund, which the Trump budget would eliminate, or Section 8 housing vouchers.

"Each of these programs not only end homelessness and housing insecurity, but they are proven to increase the educational attainment of the kids living in those affordable homes and to increase the lifetime earnings of the kids living in those homes," Yentel said.

Yentel called Trump's budget proposal "extreme overreach" and said she worries it moves the goal posts so far that "it creates an environment where cuts only half as deep seem like a reasonable compromise."