

Housing activist on waiting list for two decades finally gets an apartment

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Laura Donaldson's two-bedroom apartment on the Near West Side isn't glamorous, but it's the home she's always wanted.

After two decades of lingering on the Chicago Housing Authority's waiting list, living in shelters and hopping between the homes of relatives and friends, Donaldson last month finally signed a lease for an apartment.

Donaldson's wait to get a unit spacious enough for her wheelchair, close to public transportation and not far from her doctors' offices illustrates just how complicated it can be for disabled residents to find places to live, experts said. So for Donaldson and some housing activists, getting an apartment was a victory.

"I never thought I'd get here," said the 47-year-old single mother, who has cerebral palsy and relies on a wheelchair. "When I tell people how long I've waited for housing, it makes them ill. I never gave up hope, never stopped praying for it."

Donaldson's situation is unusual; the average wait for applicants to get a public housing unit or a housing choice voucher is from one to five years, CHA officials said. Donaldson first applied for public housing in 1996, when she was living with her mother on the Far South Side. She was offered an apartment on the North Side in 2005 but turned it down because it was a lengthy commute on public transportation to her South Side doctor's office. She was offered a unit three years later, but she turned that down, too, because it was in a neighborhood she found unsafe.

Chicago is already a tight market for affordable housing. For residents who are disabled, finding a suitable apartment is even more difficult, said Cathleen O'Brien, a housing community organizer with the advocacy group Access Living. The supply does not approach the demand.

"The main problem is there is a huge overlap between disability and poverty. When you only have a monthly check, and the average monthly rent for an apartment is \$1,200, it's just not doable," O'Brien said.

CHA officials said that they are making more of an effort to provide housing for the disabled. Applicants who identify as disabled are given preference both on the agency's waiting lists and are eligible for programs that set aside vouchers specifically for that population.

The agency recently increased the amount of money it budgets to help landlords modify their buildings to accommodate the disabled, according to officials at the CHA, while disabled applicants with housing choice vouchers get automatic, unlimited extensions to try to find an apartment.

But that doesn't fix the hardship for everyone.

Shortly after Donaldson's mother died in 2009, she and her siblings couldn't keep up with the bills and lost their childhood home to foreclosure. That made Donaldson's need for housing more urgent. So while she remained on the waiting list, she ended up crashing with friends and staying for months with relatives. Two years ago, having exhausted the generosity of others, she moved into the Pacific Garden Mission in the South Loop.

"I didn't want to be anyone's burden," she said. "Moving into the shelter was something I had to do by myself because I was the one with no place to live. When I first got there, I stayed inside all day, I was so ashamed."

But the experience transformed Donaldson into a bold housing activist. She became a symbol of the plight of the disabled to obtain housing earlier this year, when she attempted to occupy a vacant apartment at Lathrop Homes, a mostly boarded-up complex on the North Side. Shortly after the protest, she was contacted by the CHA and offered an apartment. CHA officials said the offer was not in response to her protest.

Still, it was welcomed by Donaldson and activists who were at the protest with her.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, Donaldson gathered with dozens of her family and closest friends for a housewarming in her new apartment. Even with several wheelchairs there, most of her guests could fit inside her apartment and maneuver comfortably.

They sat in the cool of the air conditioning, listening to music and eating snacks. Around them were Donaldson's colorful pink and orange decorations and a welcome sign she made that read, 'Officially Retired from the Streets.'

"This is just beautiful," said the Rev. Bruce Ray, of Kimball Avenue Church, as he looked around the playground and courtyard behind her unit. "It feels like you're a part of a community. This is how it's supposed to be. I'm just so happy for you."

Donaldson basked in the moment of celebration.

She gleefully showed her guests around the unit and demonstrated how easily her wheelchair got through the widened doorways and slid under kitchen counters. But for much of the party, Donaldson was outdoors with her guests, watching her grandson and his pals jump around and climb on the playground equipment. When it was time to move the party back in the house, the old spirit of protest took over.

"Whose house?" one of Donaldson's guests yelled playfully as she wheeled herself in through her back door.

"My house!" she replied, with a wide grin across her face, raising her hands from her wheels and lifting them in the air.

"Whose house?" the guest yelled again.

"My house!"