

Up to 600,000 expected to apply when L.A. reopens Section 8 housing list this month after 13 years

Los Angeles Times, by Doug Smith, Contact Reporter, October 1, 2017, 5:00 a.m.

Lately, home for Tamara Meeks has been the screened-in back porch of a tiny house behind an apartment building near 66th Street and Compton Avenue. At night she slips into the kitchen to sleep on a mover's blanket while her two dogs sleep under a car seat on the porch.

Her arrangement, with the parents of a friend's friend, is the latest of a string of temporary arrangements Meeks has made during the 13 years she's been waiting for a Section 8 housing voucher.

Meeks, now 36, mailed in an application in 2004 when Los Angeles housing officials last opened the waiting list for the federal rental subsidies intended to provide decent, safe and affordable housing to the poor.

Instead of receiving subsidies, she and the other 300,000 applicants got places in line. Some have been waiting ever since.

Because every Section 8 voucher is already taken, and federal budgets haven't kept up with poverty, the only way to move up in line is for someone who has a voucher to relinquish it.

Turnover, due mainly to rising income or death, is rare. Today, with about 57,000 vouchers in use, only about 2,400 become available each year.

Meeks, who reached the top of the list in August and is now searching for a new home, was among the few eligible applicants still waiting.

That means it's time for the housing authority to open the waiting list again. Analysts expect up to 600,000 to apply during a two-week registration period this month.

Instead of sending requests by mail, as they did in 2004, applicants will fill out forms online.

This time, fortunes will be determined much more quickly in a sudden-death winnowing with Las Vegas-style odds.

After an initial screening to drop those who neither live nor work in the city, and are therefore ineligible, 20,000 will be selected by lottery to make up the new Section 8 waiting list. The other 580,000 will be out of luck, though they are still able to sign on to the list of 35,000 waiting for public housing.

For the fortunate ones, being chosen will hardly be cause for immediate celebration. Some of them may wait in line for another decade or more for their turn.

The Section 8 housing lottery arises from a quandary housing officials face in parceling out a limited resource that, instead of alleviating the poverty of the masses, has become a precious gift for a few.

"It makes a big difference in people's lives to have a decent place that is affordable," said Douglas Guthrie, chief executive and president of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles. "It can change somebody's life."

For Meeks, who has dabbled in several careers and now works in a call center, it means she can finally move forward with her life plan.

"I think I'll be able to have my life back," she said, and possibly a change of direction. Although she has previously dated women, she said, "I would like to be blessed and have a child and have a good guy in my life."

Because of the long odds, Guthrie said he has to avoid overstating the importance of the new list. But he sees it as highly symbolic.

“It’s going to expose the tremendous need there is in Los Angeles for affordable housing and the limited resources that are traditionally available to address this tremendous need,” he said.

“By every indicator, every factor, every study that’s been done shows the growing number of households in Los Angeles that have lower incomes and cannot afford housing in Los Angeles.”

Adding irony to the situation, the random wait for the 20,000 will be lengthened by a new initiative to house the homeless.

As construction funded by last year’s Proposition HHH picks up in the years ahead, up to 1,000 vouchers will be taken from the lottery pool for homeless people selected for housing on a scale of acuity that takes into account mental and physical disability and time on the street.

Other vouchers can be diverted for projects such as the redevelopment of the Jordan Downs housing project.

That will leave only about half of the vouchers that become available each year for families who are living in poverty.

Despite the long odds, housing authority officials are preparing for a massive response.

The authority has hired a consultant to manage the online registration, prescreen applicants and pick the random winners. The consultant, CVR Associates, will also do outreach to alert eligible families and assist those who don’t have access to computers.

The sign-up period is scheduled to open at 6 a.m. on Oct. 16 and remain open for two weeks. There is no advantage to being first in line to register, said Carlos Van Natter, director of Section 8 housing. After the screening, all remaining applications will have an equal chance.

Are you eligible for a Section 8 rent subsidy?

To be eligible, applicants must live or work in the city of Los Angeles and fall within the very low income level. At least 75% of subsidies will go to those at the extremely low income level.

Household size	Very low income	Extremely low income
1 person	\$31,550	\$18,950
2 people	36,050	21,650
3 people	40,550	24,350
4 people	45,050	27,050
5 people	48,700	29,250
6 people	52,300	32,960
7 people	55,900	37,140
8 people	59,500	41,320

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

To be eligible, applicants must meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s definition of “very low income.” For Los Angeles, that’s \$31,550 for an individual and \$45,050 for a family of four.

Legal residency in the U.S. is required, but the benefit could be prorated if only some members of a household qualify, Van Natter said.

Households receiving a Section 8 voucher pay 30% of their income as rent. The Housing Authority pays the rest and is reimbursed by HUD.

Incomes are reviewed annually. Contributions are adjusted up or down if necessary.

U.S. housing law requires the authority to distribute 75% of the vouchers to those of extremely low income — a maximum of \$18,950 for an individual and \$27,050 for a family of four.

“It’s not difficult for us to meet that requirement,” Guthrie said. “The vast majority of those that are in our programs are extremely low income.”

The shortage of federal housing vouchers is a national phenomenon. It’s just worse in urban areas with a high poverty rates, Los Angeles among them.

A national survey published in 2013 by the Public and Affordable Housing Research Corp. found that waiting lists had been closed for more than two years by 41% of public housing agencies.

While the average wait was 23 months, the analysis concluded that it would take more than nine years before every household on a waiting list would receive help.

A county-by-county analysis showed average waits were highest in parts of New York and Washington, D.C., exceeding 10 years.

Waits were 4.07 years in Los Angeles County, 5.13 in Alameda County and 7.61 in San Diego County.

The Housing Authority of Los Angeles County, which operates separately from the city’s authority, also has a waiting list. It last opened in 2009, and currently still has 40,000 waiting, spokeswoman Elisa Vasquez said. There is no projected date to open it again...

HUD regulations require housing authorities to come up with fair methods to distribute scarce resources. Though not required, lotteries are commonly used to manage the scarcity.

“I don’t feel like it’s Las Vegas,” Guthrie said. “We’re going to do the best we can to make sure that everybody has the opportunity and that it’s a fair system and a transparent system even if the end resources are very limited.

“Clearly there are many families that live for extended periods of time in poverty and just getting by.”

doug.smith@latimes.com

Copyright © 2017, Los Angeles Times