

Santa Cruz County housing authority looking for Section 8 landlords

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SANTA CRUZ >> Hundreds of low-income families in Santa Cruz County have a federally-funded Section 8 voucher to help them pay rent. The problem is many listings say: “No Section 8.”

A family with a Section 8 voucher pays 30 percent of their income toward rent with the Housing Authority of the County of Santa Cruz paying the landlord the rest; about 1,800 landlords in the county accept Section 8 vouchers.

The county is experiencing a housing affordability crisis, with wages stagnating for many while rents keep rising. Last year, weekly wages in Santa Cruz County averaged \$950 compared to \$2,392 over the hill in Santa Clara County, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In December, median monthly rent was \$2,361 for a two-bedroom rental in Santa Cruz County, up from \$1,934 three years ago.

Meanwhile, about 4,500 families in Santa Cruz County benefit from Section 8 vouchers, many who would have been priced out of the rental market, but another 2,400 families remain on the waiting list, according to the housing authority.

To address the crisis, the housing authority is offering an incentive to landlords to accept Section 8 tenants.

Landlords will be eligible for reimbursement up to \$2,500 in cases of unpaid rent, damages or legal fees for terminating a lease for violations in the tenant’s first year.

“There has really never been a better time for landlords to accept families with Section 8 vouchers,” said Jenny Panetta, executive director of the Housing Authority of the County of Santa Cruz. “We’ve always assured landlords that tenants with rental vouchers are good tenants... In some ways, they’re even better. Section 8 tenants now come with a certain degree of protection for landlords.”

Families get six months to find a landlord to accept a Section 8 voucher, but Panetta said they can get an extension, often to nine months

Reimbursement claims for landlords will be subject to availability of funds.

The housing authority has \$100,000 available, with funding provided by the County of Santa Cruz, and the cities of Capitola, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and Watsonville.

Landlords countywide are eligible.

Panetta said the incentive program was developed with the All In Landlord Partnership, a collaborative of public agencies and nonprofits working to help tenants with rental assistance get connected to landlords.

“The program model is a fairly new concept, and we’re among a handful of California communities with similar programs,” she added. “The landlords we’ve spoken to about the program have been enthusiastic, but we’re eager to get the word out... We hope this will encourage landlords to give the Section 8 program another look.”

Another change at the housing authority is the hiring of a leasing specialist, Blanca Mendoza, as a single point of contact for landlords, helping them with everything related to renting to Section 8 tenants, easing the lease-up process and providing customer service.

“We’re committed to making the Section 8 Program work for landlords,” Panetta said. “We know that if it doesn’t work for landlords, it doesn’t work for anyone.”