

‘We are very disturbed’: Low-income renters losing affordable housing in Renton

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Renton renters pleaded with the City Council on Monday for help after landlords at two apartment complexes said they will no longer accept Section 8 housing vouchers.

Dozens of Renton residents have turned to the City Council for help after their landlords said they will no longer accept federal housing vouchers for low-income renters.

Several residents at the council’s Monday night meeting urged its members and Mayor Denis Law to adopt legislation to prevent what they say is discrimination against renters in the Section 8 program.

Eboni Pennington, who lives at the Gramercy Apartments complex in southeast Renton, said a lack of landlords in the region who are willing to accept Section 8 vouchers has made finding a new home difficult.

“It’s very hard trying to find a place right now,” she said. “Every day I’m calling a place, and every day someone is telling me, ‘We don’t take housing vouchers.’”

Pennington is one of dozens of Renton residents who recently received notice that their Section 8 housing contracts would not be renewed. The rash of defections has put additional pressure on an already-strained Section 8 program, and left the renters scrambling to secure housing from a shrinking pool of landlords willing to accept them.

Renton housing officials confirmed that at least 42 households at the Gramercy complex could lose their homes. Twenty-three renters at the nearby Renton Woods apartment complex were also informed that their Section 8 contracts would not be renewed at the end of their leases, said Renton Housing Authority operations administrator Jill Richardson.

Together, the affected Gramercy and Renton Woods residents represent 7 percent of the roughly 900 housing vouchers administered by the Renton Housing Authority. Voucher holders at Renton’s Windsor Apartments complex recently received similar notices, but it’s not clear how many have been affected, Richardson said.

“We are very disturbed, as some of these are landlords that we’ve partnered with for years,” Richardson told council members at the Monday night meeting.

How small the pool of participating Renton landlords has shrunk is also unclear. The authority does not track over time the number of units available to Section 8 renters, or the number of landlords who accept Section 8 vouchers.

But Richardson said the numbers fluctuate with the viability of the housing market. “It seems like when the housing market is bad, they run to us,” she said. “When the housing market is good, they run away from us. And right now the housing market is very good.”

Renters and other activists at Monday’s meeting pleaded with city officials to pass an ordinance to bar landlords from discriminating against qualified renters who rely on sources of income besides their wages to pay rent. The Seattle City Council adopted a similar ordinance in August.

“This is a big deal for us,” said Mayor Law. “We can’t pass something tonight, but we’ve got to pass this as quickly as we can.”

But it’s unclear whether the proposed legislation will come in time to help residents at Renton Woods and Gramercy — or to prevent landlords from ending their participation in the program altogether.

Scott Crain, a lawyer for the Northwest Justice Project who is representing some of the residents, said landlords are not required by law to disclose their reasons for opting out of the Section 8 program. But a majority of the affected renters at the Renton Woods and Gramercy apartment complexes are black women, and the landlords' decision to end their participation in the Section 8 program may have had a "discriminatory effect," he said.

Crain said he was able to negotiate an agreement with the management at the Renton Woods complex to allow renters to remain for an additional 30 days while they look to secure new housing. He said the group is also considering filing a lawsuit on behalf of the renters.

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