

AB 653 (Reyes) - Federal Housing Voucher Acceleration Program

SUMMARY

The housing voucher program is the federal government's most effective means to assist very low-income families with renting in the private market. Vouchers are a proven way to reduce homelessness and housing instability while providing steady revenue to private landlords. And yet, California Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) that administer vouchers, leave tens of thousands of vouchers unused every year. While the failure to “lease up” vouchers happens for a number of reasons, the state can and should do more to leverage federal dollars and close the gap in unused vouchers statewide.

BACKGROUND

Vouchers help over 710,000 people in 350,000 households afford safe and decent housing, 60% of whom are families with children, 19% older adults, and 27% people with disabilities. California's voucher families are disproportionately families of color. Rural, urban, and suburban communities all benefit from federal vouchers, which deconcentrate poverty and improve the lives of participants by allowing them to access neighborhoods with high performing schools, reliable transportation, and quality jobs.

Increasingly, California's voucher families face significant barriers to using their vouchers because they can't compete in the state's competitive rental housing market. People typically wait years on a voucher waitlist, only to find they can't secure an apartment within the allotted “search time.” For example, at the LA County PHA, where the waitlist has been closed since 2009, just 44.7% of voucher recipients are able to find housing with their voucher. In San Bernardino, voucher families have slightly better luck, although 33% of families are still forced to give their voucher back to the PHA. A household's inability to use a voucher often means that the household will fall into homelessness or continue to live in unsafe, overcrowded, or uninhabitable living situations. Further, because of the way the program is

funded, failure to utilize all our federally allocated vouchers can result in lower rental subsidy funding for California jurisdictions in future years.

SOLUTION

Increasing voucher utilization is especially important to address the ongoing homelessness crisis as local jurisdictions rely on vouchers to secure permanent housing for their unhoused and extremely-low income residents. In communities across the country, models that pair vouchers with support services and landlord participation incentives increase the success of voucher placement.

AB 653 would create a program to provide housing search assistance, landlord incentives, and deposit resources to help tenants with vouchers find and secure apartments in low poverty neighborhoods. The bill would also require housing authorities that have low lease-up rates to apply evidence-based tools to increase utilization (such as increasing the value of a voucher by using Small Area Fair Market Rents) and to work with the Department of Housing and Community Development to further analyze and improve their voucher policies.

AB 653 will prevent Californians from falling into homelessness, increase oversight and accountability, and invest in proven solutions to house underrepresented and Californians.

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