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Housing vouchers could be accepted throughout county

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The City-County Council will discuss Proposal 215 once again at its Jan. 27 committee hearing.

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By VICTORIA T. DAVIS | 0 comments

Sabrina Wright is a mother of six whom has been receiving the Housing Choice Voucher for the past 10 years. She currently lives with four of her six children on the southeast side of Indianapolis and like most parents, wants her children to receive a top-notch education, one reason for her move to the area.

Wright successfully found housing, but many other voucher-holders in Marion County struggle each day to secure housing. Currently, all property owners are not legally required to accept the voucher. The freedom to choose to accept the voucher could come to an end very soon if the City-County Council succeeds in their efforts to mandate all property owners accept the Housing Choice Voucher, previously known as Section 8. The City-County Council will discuss Proposal 215 once again at its Jan. 27 committee hearing.

Wright believes once one tenant leaves a bad impression, it makes other landlords reluctant to accept vouchers again.

"It's like a job interview," she said. "You basically have to sell yourself when you do run into a property and let them know you can take care of it."

Proposal 215, sponsored by City-County Councilman at-large Leroy Robinson, Democrat, adds "source of income" to Indianapolis' housing discrimination law among race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, color and other classes. This added protected class has rallied up community members who agree with the proposal, but also infuriated property owners who believe it will run them out of business.

The Fair Housing Center of Central Indiana (FHCCI) recently released its "Fair Housing Rental Testing Audit" which revealed high refusal rates for Indiana residents seeking housing with Housing Choice Vouchers. The tests showed those using vouchers faced denial rates of 82 percent and in predominantly white areas, home seekers with vouchers faced refusal rates of 90 percent.

"What's happening is, the individuals are being driven right back into poverty areas and it's defeating the purpose of the program," said Amy Nelson, executive director of the FHCCI. "In many ways it's putting a wall up in high poverty areas and saying 'Once you get in there you're stuck and we aren't going to help you get back out' and that's not what we want."

Nelson added that discrimination shouldn't bar individuals from housing opportunities.

"The purpose of the Section 8 program back in the 70s when it was put in place, was to allow individuals struggling with poverty into neighborhoods where they had better access and opportunity."

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FHCCI states in its audit report that there are currently 7,247 Housing Choice Voucher holders in Marion County with 89 percent being Black, 8 percent being white, 1 percent Hispanic and 1 percent other. In October of 2014, after the Indianapolis Housing Agency opened up the voucher waiting list for the first time in a decade, more than 45,000 Hoosiers applied to be placed on the waiting list.

Robinson said there are 40 cities and 15 states that have this policy in place and believes voucher holders are being discriminated against.

"Housing providers can enforce the same rules and policies as anyone else renting and if they aren't doing that, that's a poor management process. Bad renters come in all shapes and sizes," noted Nelson.

Gary Hobbs, president of BWI LLC., a minority-owned property management company who encourages housing voucher holders, doesn't agree with managers that state voucher holders damage property at a higher rate than non-voucher holders.

"You're going to have voucher holders that damage the property and you're going to have non-voucher holders to damage the property. Over my experience I haven't noticed where vouchers holders are more likely to damage the property. Some of our best renters are voucher holders," commented Hobbs.

"I have mixed feelings," said Hobbs. "What I have an issue with are the guidelines that are set for all property owners. It makes it not feasible in some cases, but not in all, because the standards (for Housing Choice Voucher tenants) are higher. That's the only place I'm a little skeptical."

As an example Hobbs explained that if a small paint chip is found by housing authority that examines a potential voucher tenant property, the inspection won't be passed.

"At that point, most property managers will say 'That's OK because I have five other people who don't have vouchers and can deal with the paint chip.' But it's a good thing for the industry and for the people."

Wright said over the years she's had property managers who treat her well, but has turned down other properties because of dreadful upkeep.

"I've found properties where lots of garbage was outside and I've also found another that looked beautiful on the outside but was infested with roaches on the inside. The landlord asked me 'How many children do you have?' and at the time I had my six children and myself," said Wright. "They said 'Well you have all of those kids around and have never seen roaches?'"

Wright says she was told by her new property managers that she is their first tenant to hold a Housing Choice Voucher, however, the leasing specialist did require a deposit amount larger than tenants who aren't voucher holders.

"But I was willing to do that because I wanted to put my kids into a nice area," she mentioned. "Someone else might not want to pay a \$933 deposit but if they lower the amount then they are going to get people who won't take care of the property."

Some members of the City-County Council would like to see a budget plan for this proposal as well as have the proposal apply to only property managers of a certain size – small renters.

"Landlords, who participate, rave about it being guaranteed rent and see a significant amount, sometimes the full amount, going directly into their bank accounts," said Nelson.

Wright thinks the proposal is a good idea for those that truly need the assistance but believes managers should thoroughly examine a voucher holder's history to determine what type of renter they are.

And, she says, someday, she wants to exit the program herself. "I believe Section 8 is like a stepping stone," said Wright. "Although I've had Section 8 for 10 years, I've also had issues with employment over those years, but eventually I want to be off of Section 8."



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