

Housing Authority gets \$255K

Subheadline: City is hub for affordable homes with nearly 400

Slug: LANNWS-07-08-23 HOUSING AUTHORITY

Print depth: 36.52 (5441 characters)

Start date/time: Jun 26, 2023 06:23 PM

Section tags: nc-lan
nc-lan/news
nc-lan/news/government

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Content

The Housing Authority of Lancaster received a \$255,750 grant from the Resident Opportunity and Self-Sufficiency (ROSS) program June 1.

Veronica Williams, Lancaster Housing Authority executive director, said the money will be used to “implement new programs, such as homeownership preparation classes,” and help existing programs, like the financial literacy program, to keep running.

Williams made the announcement when she presented the organization’s annual report to Lancaster City Council at its June 13 meeting.

Williams also noted that when she began leading the local organization in 2021, it was considered “substandard” by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. It is now rated “standard” and “back in HUD’s good graces,” as it works toward becoming a “high performance” agency, she reported.

The Lancaster Housing Authority is modernizing all 140 public housing units it operates. It has successfully completed 87 renovations, with 53 to go.

“If you guys ever get the chance to come look at the units, they look so different,” Williams said. “They look like a house or an apartment that you (might) go to in any neighborhood.”

As of June 5, there were 133 occupied units and seven vacant units in the city’s public housing system.

The average housing assistance payment (HAP) for rent is \$500 a month, in a study conducted on three sections of Caroline Courts. The average total rent after HAP is \$373 a month for one bedroom, \$505 for two bedrooms, \$622 for three bedrooms and \$691 for four bedrooms.

Landlords needed

The Housing Authority of Lancaster currently has 252 housing choice vouchers available for Section 8 housing, and is actively using 240 of those.

Williams said the Housing Authority still needs landlords with homes to rent in Lancaster County who are willing to participate in the Section 8 housing program to accommodate the city's growing need for affordable housing.

"We currently have 19 voucher holders ranging from (needing) one bedroom to four bedrooms that are seeking housing at this time," Williams said. "The benefit of this program is that it guarantees landlords will receive rents."

Williams said she knows potential landlords may be skeptical of the program, because they've "heard horrible things," about "the inspections and things that we do, but things are changing."

Williams said the Housing Authority is increasing its allowable rents for Section 8 housing to be more in line with the market today. She believes word is spreading about being able to charge higher rent for Section 8 housing, and hopes that will bring more landlords into the program.

"I know how important the Housing Authority of Lancaster is to our community ... having a safe place to live is incredibly important," Lancaster Mayor Alston DeVenny said.

He noted that between public housing and Section 8 housing vouchers, the Housing Authority provides almost 400 homes in the city, not counting other low-income housing.

"I think it's critically important to understand Lancaster is the center for assisted housing in this county by far," he said.

"I'm proud to be a part of that, and everybody in those housing units are a part of our community, and I think it's a great thing," DeVenny said.

Demographics

The report also showed facts and figures about Lancaster affordable housing residents.

There are 127 families in public housing, totaling 333 family members, for an average of 2.62 members per family. There are 181 children living in the city's public housing, with an average age of 7. Women head 90% of the households, while men head about 10%. About 87% of residents are Black, about 12% are white, about 1.5% are Hispanic and less than 1% are mixed-race.

There are 211 families in Section 8 housing, totaling 523 family members, for an average of 2.48 members per family. There are 242 children living in Section 8 housing, with an average age of 11. Women head 93% of the households, while men head about 7%. About 89% of residents are Black, about 10% are white, about 1.5% are Hispanic and less than 1% are listed as other.

Lancaster Housing Services

The Housing Authority of Lancaster also works with the nonprofit Lancaster Housing Services Inc. (LaHS), established in March 2022. Its programs include Paws on Parade, Kids Read Now summer reading program, financial literacy (Sharonview Federal Credit Union) and as a FoodShare distribution site (HOPE in Lancaster).

Williams said with the help of LaHS, the Lancaster Housing Authority is planning more programs for families to work toward self-sufficiency, with education, such as in-house GED preparation, continued art therapy sessions and back-to-work programs.

She reported that 54% of public housing families are in contact with LaHS, with 67% of families in Caroline Courts apartments and 64% of families in Frank L. Roddey Homes participating in programs and 31% of participating families return for more programming.

Among families receiving Section 8 housing vouchers, 17% are in contact with LaHS, 14% are actively participating in programs and 41% of participating families return for more programming.

“It is our hope that the City Council, city of Lancaster, Lancaster County, along with HUD, HAL Board, LaHS Board, will continue to support our efforts to bring safe, decent and sanitary conditions to the low-income families of Lancaster County,” Williams said. “Our ultimate goal is to empower and uplift all the families we serve in our community.”