

# Times Argus

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## **State closes waiting list for housing subsidy**

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Local housing authorities around the state have capped requests for Section 8 housing vouchers by closing waiting lists as they deal with a surge in applications.

Now the state is following suit.

The Vermont State Housing Authority will close its waiting list for Section 8 vouchers by the end of September due to a burgeoning waiting list that exceeds 3,000 people.

Richard Williams, executive director of the program, said he expects the number of applicants on the waiting list to jump from 3,200 to 3,800 or 4,000 by Sept. 30, when the list officially closes.

"We never used to close our list. This is the second time we closed it, but the demand is just so high and people call and ask, 'where am I on the list' and you don't have any good news to give them," he said.

The VSHA has 3,950 vouchers to distribute to applicants who qualify, but the rate of turnover is only 25 to 50 vouchers a month. Williams said, at this rate, there will be people on the waiting list four years or longer.

To be eligible for the program, applicants' household income must not exceed 30 percent of the median household income in their county. Statewide, this means a family of four living on about \$19,300 would be at 30 percent of the median income, or \$64,400, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's website.

Under the Section 8 voucher subsidy, low-income families pay a percentage of their monthly adjusted income, usually about 30 or 40 percent, toward their rent, while the rest of the amount is covered by the housing authority. The vouchers can be used for any private rental.

In Montpelier, the waiting list for Section 8 vouchers has been closed since July 2009.

Jo Ann Troiano, executive director of the Montpelier Housing Authority, said they don't anticipate opening it back up anytime soon.

"As with most of the housing authorities in Vermont, funding isn't sufficient when it comes to issuing vouchers for the program. I'm spending more every month than we're getting from HUD. There might be a slight increase, but it isn't keeping up," she said.

Montpelier issues 122 vouchers a year and has about 65 people on the waiting list. Troiano said cutting down the waiting list has proven to be a slow process. In fact, she said she only two vouchers have been issued since October 2008, and that was because people left the program.

"People come in every day and want to apply and we have to tell them (the waiting list) is closed," Troiano said.

In Rutland, the Section 8 housing waiting list has been closed since October 2009. Kevin Loso, executive director of the Rutland Housing Authority, said this was the first time the waiting list has been closed since the program began in the 1980s.

"We have about a three-year wait list right now, and we'll look at reopening it when it gets down to 24 months or two years," he said.

Loso also said with no new Section 8 money coming into the system and a backlog of applicants, closing the waiting list came down to a fairness issue.

"It's not reasonable to build up people's hopes or expectations if there is no reasonable time frame that they will get a Section 8 voucher, if ever," he said.

The RHA has a total of 70 vouchers to distribute to qualified applicants and there are 300 people on the state waiting list from the Rutland area, Williams said.

Patty Alberti, Section 8 specialist for Rutland, said voucher turnover is pretty rare, which is one reason why the waiting list is so high.

"When someone gets a voucher, they pretty much hold onto it," she said.

Among other reasons for the waiting list and October cap on applicants, Loso cited a 20 percent increase in applications for Section 8 vouchers since the economy took a downward turn. He also cited a change in income level for people already in the program who lost jobs or received a cut in pay.

"At a time when the need was the greatest, the cost of the program was higher than ever."

"HUD allocates funds, but the cost of the program changes on a week-to-week basis. You can start the year thinking we're in good shape but all of a sudden one or two families lose their job and the program has to pick up the cost for the balance of their rent," said Loso.

He added that last year the program was actually in the red. "Our rent payments exceeded our budget by \$16,000," he said.

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