

Vouchers: Family Unification Program Vouchers

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Administering agency: HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing (PIH)

Year program started: 1990

Number of persons/households served: Nearly 30,000 households currently hold Housing Choice Vouchers through the Family Unification Program.

Population targeted: Low income families in danger of losing children to foster care or that are unable to regain custody primarily due to housing problems, as well as youth aging out of foster care who are at risk of homelessness.

FY14 funding: HUD has not yet issued funding for the Family Unification Program from the \$130 million available in the Tenant Protection Fund for new vouchers.

See also: *Housing Choice Voucher Program, Tenant Protection Vouchers, Services for Residents of Low Income Housing – Family Self-Sufficiency Program*

HUD's Family Unification Program (FUP) is a federal housing program aimed at preventing family separation due to homelessness, and easing the transition to adulthood for youth aging out of foster care. HUD provides FUP Section 8 vouchers to partnerships established between local public housing agencies and child welfare agencies. These vouchers can be used to prevent children from entering foster care, to reunite foster children with their parents, and to prevent homelessness among youth aging out of foster care. While recently funded after nearly nine years of inactivity, the program still reaches only a fraction of families and children in need.

HISTORY AND PURPOSE

The Family Unification Program (FUP) was signed into law in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush. The program was created as a part of the Tenant Protection Fund within the Cranston-Gonzalez Affordable Housing Act of 1990.

FUP is designed to address the housing-related needs of children in the foster care system. Of the 397,000 children who live apart from their families in America's foster care system, nearly 125,000 are separated from their families because their parents lack access to safe, decent, and affordable housing. Equally troubling are the housing challenges faced by the 23,000 youth who age out of foster care each year without the support of a permanent family. Nearly a quarter of these young people experience homelessness within a year of leaving foster care. Despite these staggering figures, child welfare workers seldom have access to the housing resources or supportive services necessary to prevent and end homelessness among vulnerable families and youth.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

FUP is administered at the local level through a partnership between public housing agencies (PHAs) and public child welfare agencies. PHAs interested in administering FUP vouchers must sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with their partner agency in order to apply to HUD in response to a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA). FUP vouchers are awarded through a competitive process. Depending on the size of the PHA, communities can receive a maximum of 100, 50, or 25 vouchers. Communities are encouraged to apply only for the number of vouchers that can be leased up quickly, meaning that both families and youth have been identified and landlords have been recruited for the program.

PHAs receiving an allocation of FUP vouchers then administer these vouchers to families and youth who have been certified as eligible for FUP by the local public child welfare agency. The FUP vouchers work in the same way a typical housing choice voucher does. The child welfare agency is required to help FUP clients gather the necessary Section 8 paperwork, find suitable housing, and to maintain their housing through aftercare services. If a child welfare agency elects to refer a young person aging out of foster care with a FUP voucher, the child welfare agency must offer educational and training vouchers, independent living programs,

counseling, and employment assistance. The housing subsidies available to youth under this program are limited to 18 months.

Eligible families include those who are in imminent danger of losing their children to foster care primarily due to housing problems, and those who are unable to regain custody of their children primarily due to housing problems. Eligible youth include those who were in foster care any time after the age of 16 and are currently between the ages of 18 and 21 (have not reached their 22nd birthday) and are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

FUNDING

Each year between 1992 and 2001, HUD awarded an average of 3,560 FUP vouchers to public housing agencies. Unfortunately, from FY02 through FY07, HUD used its rescission authority to avoid funding FUP, even though the Housing Choice Voucher program's Tenant Protection Fund, out of which FUP is funded, had carryover funds ranging from \$18 million to \$170 million. Thanks to the efforts of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, \$50 million in new funding was awarded for new FUP vouchers in FY08 and FY11. Despite the continuing availability of Tenant Protection Fund vouchers for FUP, HUD failed to issue new vouchers for FUP in FY 12 and FY13; as such there has been no new funding, despite the availability for FUP vouchers under the Tenant Protection Fund.

For the first time in many years, the Voucher Tenant Protection Fund received a robust appropriation for FY14 of \$130 million. Advocates may wish to urge HUD to issue no less than \$20 million in funding from this account to issue new vouchers for the Family Unification Program. The Administration's proposed budget for FY15 seeks \$150 million for the Voucher Tenant Protection Fund, but does not specifically propose amount for FUP vouchers.

FORECAST FOR 2014

The distribution of the Tenant Protection Fund is entirely up to the discretion of the Secretary of HUD. There are many demands on this fund to address a variety of tenant protection issues such as: public housing demolition or disposition; owners of project-based Section 8 units opting out of the program; owners of HUD-assisted housing prepaying their mortgages; and, some Rental Assistance Demonstration conversions. Therefore, it is important to inform the Secretary of the impact that this vital funding can have on the lives of children who are separated from their parents because of homelessness, and to tell the Secretary the stories of youth who have faced homelessness upon emancipation from foster care.

TIPS FOR LOCAL SUCCESS

Over the years, it has become clear that the most successful FUP partnerships require cross-training, single points of contact (liaisons) within each partner agency, and ongoing communication. In fact, HUD now requires that FUP sites have regular communication, liaisons, and other elements to support their partnership and provide case management and other supportive services to FUP households. FUP sites must include robust and ongoing case management provided by the local child welfare agency or through a contract funded by the child welfare system. HUD also encourages child welfare partners to take part in landlord recruitment, housing training for frontline staff, and encourages regular communication with the PHA point of contact. Finally, HUD encourages PHAs to enroll FUP households in the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program because this adds an extra layer of supportive services to help ensure that FUP households will successfully maintain permanent housing and reduce the amount of subsidy paid by the government overtime.

The MOU required by HUD provides an excellent formula for all community partnerships designed to share resources and information in an effort to prevent and end family and youth homelessness. In communities across the country, PHAs use this model and demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to matching services to Section 8 vouchers in order to successfully serve hard-to-house families and youth leaving foster care.

WHAT TO SAY TO LEGISLATORS

Advocates interested in housing as a vital tool for promoting family unification, easing the transition to adulthood for foster youth, and achieving significant cost savings should contact HUD and urge the Secretary to issue no less than \$20 million in funds for new FUP vouchers this year. Additionally, advocates can contact their members of the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development to urge them to set aside a minimum of \$20 million in the FY15 budget for new FUP vouchers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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