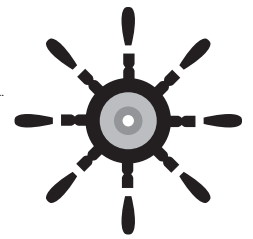


Vouchers: Family Unification Program



By Ruth White, Executive Director, National Center for Housing and Child Welfare

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

Year program started: 1990

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

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.

FY16 funding: HUD has not yet issued funding for FUP from the \$130 million available in the Tenant Protection Fund for new vouchers.

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

HUD's FUP is a federal housing program aimed at keeping homeless families together and safe and preventing homelessness among youth aging out of foster care. HUD provides FUP Housing Choice Vouchers to Public Housing Authorities who must work in partnership with public child welfare agencies in order to select eligible participants for the program. These vouchers can be used to prevent children from entering foster care, to reunite foster children with their parents, and to help ease the transition to adulthood for older youth in foster care. Although 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 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. According to HHS, more than 20,000 children are

placed in foster care because their families lack access to safe, decent, and affordable housing. Once children from homes with housing problems enter foster care, they are among the longest stayers in the foster care system. Equally troubling are the housing challenges faced by the 22,392 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. 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 14 and 24 (have not reached their 22nd birthday) and are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Unlike families, youth can only participate in FUP for 36 months. Also, it is important to note that homeless youth who have been in foster care at any point after the age of 14 are eligible for FUP.

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 has failed to issue new vouchers for FUP for the past five years.

Advocates must urge HUD to issue no less than \$20 million in funding from the Tenant Protection Fund to issue new FUP vouchers for 2016.

FORECAST

There is growing interagency support for FUP at the federal level in Congress and within the administration. With the recent passage of the Housing Opportunity through Modernization Act of 2015, Congress extended the time limit on FUP vouchers for youth from 18 months to 36 months. Also, HUD and HHS recently worked together to create a pilot program that will allow Public Housing Authorities to enroll young people using FUP vouchers into the Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) program. Young people who participate in FSS can maintain their subsidy for five years.

Because the distribution of the Tenant Protection Fund is entirely up to the discretion of the Secretary of HUD, it is important to remind the secretary of the department's joint commitment with HHS to keep families together and safe using HUD resources. It will be 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.

This year, HUD will have the authority to issue a demonstration program to allow PHAs to pair FUP vouchers for youth with the FSS Program. Under the new program, youth who agree to participate in FSS will be allowed to keep their voucher for the life of their FSS contract. FSS is a five year program. This demonstration program is designed to give young people leaving foster care increased access to services and more time to achieve self-sufficiency as they transition to adulthood. Perhaps more importantly, this demonstration sends the right message to child welfare agencies that oversee the transition to adulthood for America's most vulnerable youth—that access to affordable housing is a key to self-sufficiency for youth.

TIPS FOR LOCAL SUCCESS

Throughout 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 ongoing, intensive 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 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 over time.

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 should engage legislators who are interested in housing as a vital tool for promoting family unification, easing the transition to adulthood for foster youth, and achieving significant cost savings. Advocates can inform their elected officials that when a FUP voucher is used to reunify a family and subsidize a two bedroom unit, the community saves an average of \$32,500 per family in annual foster care costs. Additionally, advocates should contact HUD and urge the secretary to issue no less than \$20 million in funds for new FUP vouchers in 2016.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Center for Housing & Child Welfare, 301-699-0151, www.nchcw.org ■