

LMHA facing housing shortage

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The Collingwood Green development on Division Street on Feb. 7.

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Housing experts and public officials on Friday said they're pursuing a host of strategies to alleviate a Toledo-area affordable housing shortage that has prompted the Lucas County Metropolitan Housing Authority to stop accepting applicants for the agency's waiting list.

But those solutions won't develop overnight, officials and experts said. And in the meantime 2,600 applicants already awaiting LMHA's housing will continue to hope for a potentially life-changing phone call, while countless other Lucas County residents now unable to join the waiting list will try to find other affordable housing options.

LMHA leaders on Thursday announced they will close the agency's public housing waiting list, effective Tuesday. Bill Brennan, chairman of the LMHA board, said the decision was made because it's not fair to keep placing people on a waiting list when there is no immediate opportunity to house them.

"I think it's clearly reflective of the affordable housing crisis, not only in Toledo but across the country," Mr. Brennan said. Public notice will be given when the list reopens, though it's unclear when that will happen.

Currently, approximately 780 applicants have been accepted and are waiting for vacant properties through the LMHA referral process. LMHA has more than 1,820 applicants who have not been processed and are awaiting interviews, which

means about 2,600 applicants are awaiting housing.

Demetria Simpson, president and CEO of LMHA, said the housing authority has slightly more than 2,600 housing units in the low-income public housing program, and all of those are either occupied or in the process of being leased to a family or individual on the waiting list.

"We feel that it is a disservice to individuals and families if we keep accepting applications when there is no real potential of them being housed in the immediate future," Ms. Simpson said in a statement Thursday.

On Friday, she clarified that the LMHA is defining "immediate future" as within 30 days of filing an application if there is no wait time.

The housing agency is pursuing two strategies to try and alleviate the shortage, Mr. Brennan said. The first is to recruit more landlords who will accept housing choice vouchers so that people have more options. The second is to continue building quality, affordable housing developments in the county.

But building takes time, and the financing can be tricky, with limited federal assistance.

"It's unfortunate that we're in this position. We're not alone. It's a common situation throughout the country," Mr. Brennan said. "We've got multiple organizations in the community working together now to solve the problem, and I don't think that's always been the case."

Lucas County Commissioner Pete Gerken said he remembers a time not long ago when the waiting list was at least double what it is now, and while capping the waiting list is not something LMHA has had to do often, it is not unprecedented.

"This waitlist highlights our challenges. It's probably a good number to keep in front of us," he said.

He believes closing the waiting list is the right thing to do, because the longer the list gets, the less hope a person on the list has that they're going to get a phone call telling them there is an opening.

"Our goal is to within the next couple of years bring that down to a number that looks hopeful, not hopeless," he said.

Councilman Larry Sykes, who previously served on the LMHA board, also said capping the waiting list was a wise move.

"You don't want to take their names knowing that there's no way you can help them," he said.

And while not everyone who would look to LMHA for housing is on the brink of homelessness, Mr. Sykes said he does worry about those who are.

"What that does to individuals looking for homes ... it's disappointing that they can't find housing out there that they can afford," he said.

George Thomas, vice president and general counsel for the Fair Housing Center in Toledo, said the affordable housing problem in Toledo is complex, and barriers can slow or stop the creation of more affordable homes and apartments.

Ohio's Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program is designed to increase affordable housing by helping developers offset the costs of low-income rental properties, but developers have to apply for the awards and not all of them do, Mr. Thomas said. Occasionally, some local residents also oppose the construction of affordable housing, as with the Warren Commons building, an affordable housing complex planned for Franklin Avenue that was announced earlier this year.

And sometimes developers run into zoning restrictions, where certain areas are only zoned for single-family homes, effectively preventing multiple-family dwellings from being constructed, said Sarah Jenkins, director of Public Policy and Community Engagement with the Fair Housing Center.

In those cases, the solutions are in the hands of the local government.

"What other cities have done is amend those restrictions," Ms. Jenkins said.

If people who need affordable housing can't get it, Mr. Thomas said, the obvious concern is that the homeless population will increase. If that happens, shelters and organizations that serve the homeless population will need more money, and it could end up costing more than the construction of new affordable housing units.

Other cities are facing housing shortages, Mr. Thomas said, but other cities are also receiving more funds than Toledo from the Ohio Housing Finance Agency to establish more affordable housing.

"In that sense, we're falling behind other cities," he said. "We haven't had an award of LIHTC funds to develop affording housing in recent years."

Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz emphasized that the housing shortage is not just a Toledo problem, and city officials were working to mitigate the effects for families in this situation.

"Toledo is no exception to the national challenge of ensuring there is affordable housing for the working poor," he said. "We plan to continue to work with LMHA, and other partners like the Lucas County Land Bank, to do what we can

to help fill the gap.”

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