No Simple Solutions For Housing The Poor
Commentary
Susan J. Popkin

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The newly named chief executive officer of the Chicago Housing Authority, Phillip Jackson, will take over a troubled organization amid a massive upheaval. The challenges are overwhelming. But they can be surmounted, if it is clearly understood there are no simple ways to handle the complex transition now planned for some of Chicago's poorest residents.

Over the next 10 years, nearly all of the CHA's high-rise developments are slated for demolition and redevelopment, displacing more than 11,000 of the city's poorest families. CHA plans call for these families to receive Section 8 vouchers to make the transition to better housing. However, if they don't get adequate assistance, these families may end up clustered in poor inner-city communities, not much better off in their new housing than they were before.

Applicants for Section 8 vouchers already face tough challenges in finding decent housing. They must find money for transportation and for credit-check and application fees, the time to search and the stamina to navigate an indisputably complex program. Worse, many landlords do not want to accept Section 8 tenants and, in the current tight rental market, have little incentive to do so. In focus groups conducted by the Urban Institute for CHAC Inc. (the company that manages the Section 8 program in Chicago), unsuccessful searchers reported that landlords told them they were reluctant to get involved with a program known for late rental payments, troublesome requirements and an unresponsive bureaucracy. Despite CHAC's significant efforts to improve the program, many landlords still fear they will lose by renting to Section 8 tenants.

Even though it is illegal to discriminate against Section 8 holders in Chicago, focus-group participants also said they encountered widespread discrimination. Most didn't even try to seek housing in low-poverty or predominantly white areas, assuming that they would not be welcome there. Families with large numbers of children, especially teens, found discrimination an especially serious problem. Landlords assumed that teenage sons were involved with gangs or dealing drugs and that teenage daughters would attract troublemaking boys.

Finding—and keeping—apartments is likely to be even more difficult for CHA residents than for Section 8 applicants in general. The CHA residents in the focus group reported that many landlords wanted nothing to do with people from public housing.

Many of these CHA residents have complex problems that make them less than attractive as tenants to the new landlords. Many lack formal education and work experience and suffer high rates of substance abuse, domestic violence and trauma from living in what is essentially an urban war zone. For example, a young woman who has seven children was refused an apartment when the landlord, a police officer, recognized her boyfriend as a recent arrest.

Even CHA residents with less severe problems may not fare well in the private rental market. A substantial number of households have poor housekeeping records, bad rental payment histories and family members with criminal records, all of which can disqualify them from Section 8. Should such troubled households find a Section 8 unit, and then get evicted or lose their lease, they could end up worse off than they were before.

Such complex problems defy easy responses. So what will help? At least three steps are needed.

• First, acknowledge the enormity of the challenge.

• Second, understand the limitations of applying lessons learned in previous housing programs. For instance, the Gautreaux program—which helped many CHA families move to suburban communities—served only residents who volunteered. This self-selected group was much less troubled than the families who live in CHA housing today. Pushing these remaining vulnerable families from CHA units into low-poverty communities
without adequate, long-term supportive services won’t help them.

- Third, try different strategies for different groups and take a tiered approach to the transition. Service-rich mobility programs can help motivated participants find housing in better neighborhoods. But, for many former residents, it makes more sense to view mobility as an incremental process. CHAC’s new mobility counseling program, aimed at participants who are making a second move is a step in the right direction. Since these participants have already moved once and tasted success, they may be more ready to try life in low-poverty areas.

As for those who are not ready for Section 8—or who cannot find a unit in the rental market—other alternatives are needed. One model is service-enriched housing, where residents can get help addressing their personal problems and take steps toward self-sufficiency. With tiered support like this, many vulnerable families should be able to leave public housing for better places to live. Without it, only a few will.

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