

THE ADVOCATE

Federal housing subsidies to end March 1

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For former New Orleans resident Johnny Thomas, a Hurricane Katrina victim who now lives in an apartment north of Baton Rouge, the end of the month looms large.

On March 1, Thomas and thousands of other victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita across Louisiana are set to lose their federal disaster housing subsidy, a move that state officials and private charities say will leave many homeless.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it," Thomas said. "I might end up living in a shelter."

Before Katrina, Thomas worked as a bus driver in New Orleans. Now disabled, the 52-year-old lives on a \$674 monthly Supplemental Security Income check.

The Disaster Housing Assistance Program, or DHAP, covers all of Thomas' \$615 monthly rent. If the subsidy program ends, he won't be able to pay the March rent for his small apartment in a Baker complex, he said, adding that there aren't any cheaper housing options in the area.

State officials say there are thousands more like Thomas who face certain eviction and possible homelessness if the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development ends the program as planned.

"This impacts the entire coastal region of Louisiana," said Paul Rainwater, executive director of the Louisiana Recovery Authority. "We are going to fight for this."

The LRA says there are more than 30,000 households receiving the housing subsidy nationwide, including almost 17,000 scattered throughout nearly every parish in Louisiana. There are more than 900 DHAP households in East Baton Rouge Parish.

The state last year asked for a three-year extension of the program, citing the shortage of affordable housing and the national credit crunch. Former President George W. Bush's administration notified the state on Jan. 16 — the administration's last working day — that it denied the state's request for an extension.

Rainwater and U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu have since written President Barack Obama, as well as the heads of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and HUD, requesting a one-year extension. But HUD officials have not backed off the denial of the request in recent meetings, Rainwater said.

"We've got a lot of folks sending letters to the president and asking him to extend this, and we're going to keep that up," Rainwater said.

Other options

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Monteic Sizer, president of the nonprofit Louisiana Family Recovery Corps, said that while he supports an extension of the subsidy program, the state knew about the deadline and should have made more preparations to help the most vulnerable storm victims cope with the end of the housing program.

"We're talking about the people who can least afford to help themselves," Sizer said.

A major obstacle to moving storm victims out of the federal subsidy program, Rainwater and other state officials say, is the shortage of affordable housing statewide.

The LRA has been working with the Louisiana Housing Finance Agency and nonprofit organizations to build or repair more affordable housing, but Rainwater said the state needs more time to replace the 80,000 rental units that were damaged or destroyed by the 2005 storms.

The state lost nearly two months of work time because of hurricanes Gustav and Ike, and new housing construction has been delayed by the national credit crunch, he said.

HUD said it is moving some of the most vulnerable DHAP families, including the low-income elderly and the disabled, into a new permanent housing subsidy program called the Housing Choice Voucher. But the LRA argues the program will exclude about 7,000 families who still need help.

Though HUD says it and local housing agencies are "fully engaged in this conversion effort," Rainwater said he doubts the federal agency can move all of the eligible residents into the Housing Choice Voucher program by the end of the month. Only a few hundred had applied for the new program by last week, he said.

In her letter last week, Landrieu, D-La., also doubted the effectiveness of the new voucher program.

"There is a wealth of data to indicate that alternative voucher programs are inadequate to meet the needs of DHAP residents along the Gulf Coast," Landrieu wrote. "Elderly and disabled populations cannot be enrolled in time, and low-income families will be forced to sleep on the streets or move far away from their local neighborhoods."

Some storm victims who have relocated to the Baton Rouge area, including Thomas, said they haven't heard whether they will qualify for the new vouchers.

HUD officials, however, have suggested the state could tap some of the billions of dollars in Community Development Block Grant money it received after the 2005 storms to help those families who aren't eligible for the new vouchers but still need housing assistance.

But Rainwater said that money is already dedicated to key recovery projects, such as the construction of new affordable housing and the replacement of damaged public infrastructure.

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Rainwater said even if the state had the money to start its own disaster housing program, it would take much longer than three weeks to set it up. He said HUD has only recently begun sharing information about the scope of the DHAP program.

“Even if they wanted us to take the program over, we don’t have the information we need to do a basic analysis, or even to understand who they’ve put into the program and who they’ve made ineligible,” he said.

‘People are desperate’

Storm victims here are left waiting while the bureaucratic battle plays out.

Margaret Chopin, a 58-year-old New Orleans native who has also lived in a Baker apartment since FEMA’s Renaissance Village trailer park closed last year, said she and her husband aren’t sure what they’ll do March 1.

Chopin, who was just honored for her volunteer work helping other Renaissance Village residents, recently lost her job as a caseworker for Catholic Charities. She’s looking for new work but has found it difficult because of an injury, her age and the slumping national economy. Her husband’s Social Security benefit won’t be enough to cover their March rent.

“People are going to be desperate,” she said.

Katie Underwood with Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge, a nonprofit organization that helps storm victims find housing, said that without any new vouchers, 80 percent to 90 percent of the people in DHAP households in East Baton Rouge are at risk of becoming homeless.

Local nonprofit groups are already struggling to care for hurricane victims who didn’t qualify for the DHAP program, she said, and those groups lack the capacity to handle a new wave of homeless.

“I feel like it’s October 2005 again,” Underwood said. “We were just being flooded with this need that none of us had the resources or the wherewithal to manage. That’s how looking at this deadline makes me feel.”