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“Qualifications for Rental Assistance Changing”

A person who isn't elderly, disabled, or working at least 25 hours per week in Norfolk may be waiting for a very long time for rental assistance under a new policy of the Housing Agency of the City of Norfolk. If they currently receive rental assistance and are not disabled, elderly, or working, they may risk losing that assistance.



Pictured is Sheila Miller, City of Norfolk Housing Director, in the lobby of The Kensington where the Housing office is located. Nearly 100% of the 52 apartments in the Kensington are rented out with more than 50% of the residents working and paying their full rental costs. The other residents receive disability or social security benefits and five or six of the residents have at least some of their rent subsidized through the Housing Agency.

Sheila Miller, Executive Director of the Norfolk Housing Division, sent out a notice this spring to those currently receiving rental assistance that an adult must work locally at least 25 hours a week or they will be the first clients targeted for termination of their assistance. This assistance, called a voucher, may pay up to 2/3 of a person's rent. The renter typically has to come up with at least 30% of their rental expenses. That amount is based on their income so a household that includes an adult with a job would receive less assistance. The Housing Division stance is that the more that the renter can pay for their housing, the more assistance there will be available for others.

Blame it on sequestration – the cutting of federal budgets across the board. Miller said that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has drastically cut the amount of money given to agencies to distribute to families for rental assistance.

“In the past we've had the capacity to work with 254 families in the Norfolk area. Because of cuts in government aid, we now are only helping 230 families. We're going to have to cut that number even further so we're asking that, if

a low income family has an able bodied adult in their household, they need to work at least 25 hours a week to continue to receive any funds,” Miller said.

In the 30 days since the new policy has been in affect, Miller said many family members have found full or part-time jobs or have worked more hours at their current job.

"It's been a positive thing to come out of the funding cuts. There are jobs in Norfolk and people are making the choice to find them. We still aren't able to help all the families who apply for assistance but we are helping more than before we enacted the new policy," Miller said.

Miller emphasized that those who are disabled or elderly who qualify as low income will continue to receive assistance.

"Rental costs have gone up considerably all over the U.S. There have been over 100,000 less vouchers (for rental assistance) given out from the federal government across the country. At the same time, our costs are going up so we have to change how funds are distributed," Miller said.

She added that it is a benefit to the entire community when those who are able to work get jobs, reducing their needs for assistance and freeing up funds for others to use.

This summer another policy may affect some low income renters. Miller sent out letters in May informing those who receiving rental assistance that they may only qualify to live in a smaller house or apartment.

"After July 1 we will only help pay rent for one bedroom per two people in an house or apartment. Those with four in the household will receive assistance for two bedrooms. This is another way we can reduce our costs and prevent having to terminate people in need from the assistance program," Miller said.

She added that families that are already in a larger unit than they will qualify for under the new policy will be able to continue living in the larger unit; however, they will pay extra out of their own pocket to do so.

"It's our job to come up with ways to distribute the remaining assistance money so that the neediest in our society receive help," Miller said.