

# Arlington County Tenant - Landlord Commission - Discrimination Subcommittee Report on Stakeholder Challenges Regarding the Housing Choice Voucher Program

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This support summarizes the Discrimination Subcommittee's activities concerning its review of stakeholder challenges regarding the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

## About the Discrimination Subcommittee

The Housing Discrimination Subcommittee ("Subcommittee") takes steps to reduce/eliminate housing discrimination in Arlington by:

- Conducting research, gathering data, and recommending actions to reduce/eliminate housing discrimination
- Convening stakeholders to identify opportunities to reduce/eliminate housing discrimination
- Coordinating efforts to reduce/eliminate housing discrimination with County staff and other relevant commissions
- Coordinating with nonprofit or advocacy organizations
- Providing regular updates to the Tenant-Landlord Commission

The current members of the Discrimination Subcommittee are Emily Camardo (Chair), Kristen Clegg, and Christopher Wim bush. The Subcommittee is supported by our staff liaison, Rolda Nedd, who provides invaluable support to the Subcommittee and the Commission.<sup>1</sup>

## Why did we seek to review the experiences of key stakeholders of the Housing Choice Voucher Program?

Our review began with examining the state of play concerning the effectiveness and enforcement of the Commonwealth of Virginia's prohibition against housing discrimination based on sources of funds under the Virginia Fair Housing Law, which took effect on July 1, 2020. This law effectively requires landlords to accept Housing Choice Vouchers or risk legal action. The Subcommittee conducted its first meeting on this topic on December 21, 2021. One of the major outcomes of that meeting was to focus on the recent experiences of key AHCVP stakeholders, including potential residents, landlords, and the AHCVP administrators in the county government. Our review is neither scientific nor exhaustive, given the limited resources

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<sup>1</sup>The findings and recommendations contained in this report are those of the members of the Subcommittee and not of any employee of Arlington County.

available to the Subcommittee. Still, we believe the stakeholders' experiences we spoke with represent broader experiences with the program.

## What is the Housing Choice Voucher Program?<sup>2</sup>

The federally funded and locally administered Arlington Housing Choice Voucher Program (“AHCVP”) helps low-income families, the elderly, and people with disabilities obtain safe, decent, and affordable housing in the private market. Under the program, the AHCVP-qualified potential resident (“potential resident” or “resident”) must find suitable rental housing. Arlington County must then determine if the housing’s rent is reasonable and meets the annual housing quality standards (HQS) set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Arlington will enter into a housing assistance payments (HAP) contract with the property owner and pay a housing subsidy directly to the property owner on the resident’s behalf. The resident will pay the difference between the actual rent charged by the property owner and the amount subsidized by the program. (So, for example, if the monthly rent is \$1,000 and the AHCVP contributes \$700 toward the client’s rent, the resident is responsible for the remaining \$300). Access to the program is limited by income:

Income Limits			
Extremely Low - Income			
Family Size	Income Limit	Family Size	Income Limit
1	\$27,100	4	\$38,700
2	\$31,000	5	\$41,800

<sup>2</sup> This section largely summarizes how the County describes the Housing Choice Voucher Program - <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Programs/Housing/Get-Help/Rental-Services/ACHCV-Program>

3	\$34,850	6	\$44,900
<b>Very Low Income</b>			
Family Size	Income Limit	Family Size	Income Limit
1	\$45,150	4	\$64,500
2	\$51,600	5	\$69,700
3	\$58,050	6	\$74,850

Overall, Arlington's low vacancy rate makes it difficult for families with limited financial resources to find housing, and the goal of the program is to lessen the burden on low - income families to find and afford quality housing.

## Perspectives of Potential Residents

During our December 21, 2021 meeting, the Subcommittee heard from Reginette Osby and a potential resident under the program about the difficulties they faced in finding housing. Reginette Osby also attended our January 25, 2022 meeting to discuss her experience assisting with the housing search for potential tenants in the program. During the course of our discussion, the following issues were raised:

- Lack of available and HCVP eligible homes for larger families (4-5 bedrooms) in the rental market.
- When a housing option was found for the potential client, failed inspections caused further delays or unavailable housing if the landlord was unable or unwilling to make the requested repairs.
- Some realtors and property managers were not aware of the 2020 legislation that added Source of Income as a protected class.
- Some realtors and property managers were unfamiliar with the HCVP and the benefits of working with the County.

## Perspectives of Landlords

During our April 19, 2022 meeting, the Subcommittee heard from a number of apartment property managers and landlords, including Adrian Tomala of the EG Reinsch Company, Janine Landers of the Dittmar Company, and Patrick Algyer and Gerald Pierce of the Northern Virginia Apartment Association. During the course of our discussion, the following issues were raised:

- Potential residents often aren't fully informed as to how the AHCVP works and some assume that once they are approved for a voucher, there are no additional steps necessary to be housed.
- While County Staff indicated that the property inspection process was typically completed within 15 days, landlords we heard from indicated that the process can take much longer and can result in longer unit vacancies than for commercial leasing. Communications between property inspectors and landlords could also be improved.
- Payments to landlords for their first AHCVP resident can be significantly delayed
- There is poor communication between landlords and housing specialists. Some examples shared: a landlord was still holding a property for a tenant that went to another property, landlords and tenants don't know who to contact when their county case manager leaves, and difficulties tracking down late checks from the county.
- Landlords do not know how much rent the county will cover until the county has gone through their approval process. Landlords would like an estimate from the county when appropriate.

## Perspectives of AHCVP Administrators

During our February 15, 2022, and March 15, 2022 meeting, the Subcommittee heard AHCVP administrators, including Vanessa Street, Executive Director of the Arlington Housing Choice Voucher Program, and Russell Young, an AHCVP Inspector. During the course of our discussions, the following issues were raised:

- As of February 25, 2022, there are roughly 300 families on the Housing Choice Voucher Program waiting list that are in need of affordable housing
- With Arlington County's low rental vacancy rate, more landlord participation in the program is critical to meeting housing demand through the program
- The need for a greater focus on racial equity in the program

## Opportunities for Improvement

Overall, we believe the AHCVP is an impactful program that makes a difference for residents in partnership with the County's landlords. However, we believe the following improvements could strengthen the program.

1. Establish a forum with Arlington County AHCVP staff, a member of the County Board, and landlords to discuss improvements to the program
2. Consider establishing a fund for landlords to use to make repairs for issues identified during inspections, particularly for landlords with five or fewer units, as a benefit to participating in the program
3. Conduct a review of business processes used to process housing applications under the program to reduce application processing time as compared to commercial application processing
4. Conduct a review of all outreach and education efforts conducted by the County to both potential residents as to how the AHCVP works, the housing application process, and how to be proactive tenants and landlords on the benefits of the program (e.g., guaranteed rent)