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About Section 8 Housing

by Kata Orndorff

The Housing Choice Voucher Program, commonly referred to as Section 8, is a federal housing assistance program administered through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for low-income households. Individuals and families that qualify are subsidized for a housing unit they find on the open market. The subsidy allowed for an individual in Tucson is the average rental amount for a one-bedroom unit in Pima County. Chemically sensitive people may be allowed a two-bedroom unit, and therefore higher subsidy, if their doctor writes a letter saying they need an outgassing room for items that need to be in a separate room from the space they live in.

A helpful publication called "Section 8 Made Simple" is available from Technical Assistance Collaborative, Inc., Boston MA, 617-266-5657, www.tacinc.org.

The accompanying article tells how Deborah Mayaan was able to find a unit that was safe enough for her and that Section 8 would cover.

Successfully using a Section 8 voucher with landlords who aren't accustomed to Section 8

by Deborah Mayaan, January 2003

Be organized and well prepared. Develop a list of screening questions before calling about properties from the ads. This helps in deciding if seeing this property is worth the time for you and for the owner or property manager. Don't mention Section 8 at this stage.

When going to see the property, dress nicely. Be business-like with the property manager or owner. Act like this is a job interview. Don't tell the owner/manager your tales of woe about finding housing. Just be very clean and clear about what kind of rental you are seeking. If you can do it naturally, establish some connection with the owner/manager. Comment on something she is proud about with this rental, or appreciate work that has gone into it. If you find you have some common interest, talk just a little bit about this (not to turn this into a long

conversation, just to establish points of connection). Also, make a mental note of any opinions expressed by the owner/manager.

Go through the rental to see if it offers what you need. It can be very helpful to develop an inspection list of the things you are looking for. I also brought along a copy of the list of things that Section 8 requires (like ventilation in the bathroom, minimum room size, the drain pipe for the hot water heater overflow valve). I carried a clipboard with my inspection lists, blank paper for other notes, and beneath this, the Section 8 packet to give to landlords. I also brought along a tape measure to check square footage if a bedroom was marginal about meeting the size requirement.

If it meets your personal needs, tell the owner/manager that you would very much like to rent this property.

If you have a disability that requires reasonable accommodations from the owner/manager, as I do, this is the time to explain what kind of accommodations you need. (I had already told them in the screening phone call that some of the questions I would be asking were because I am chemically sensitive and get sick from things like new paint and carpeting, and pesticides and herbicides.)

Explain the type of accommodations you need clearly. For me, they include:

- If a repair is needed, to tell me what materials they would normally use. If I cannot tolerate these materials, then I will find substitute materials/methods and either provide them, or pay the price difference between these materials and what they would normally use.
- I need to replace a section of window so that I can vent my printer to the outside, and will return it to original condition when I move.
- I need to have a clear sealant applied to some surfaces like particle-board cupboards (at my expense, actually with help from DIRECT's home modification program), noting that this does not damage the surfaces and in fact is likely to add value. [DIRECT is an Independent Living Center; its purpose is to assist people with disabilities. 1023 N. Tyndall, Tucson, AZ 85719, 624-6452).

Once they affirm that they are willing to work with you on accommodations, you can talk about Section 8. In your conversation with the owner/manager, hopefully you developed some small connection or heard something that can help you lead into this topic.

For example, with a property I rented, I heard the landlady say she wanted

everyone to be able to have quality housing. So I said, “Earlier you talked about how you’d like everyone to have quality housing. Until I get stronger and can earn more money, I need housing assistance to get good housing that will help me heal.” I then pulled out Section 8 papers and explained how the program worked, that I would pay a portion of the rent and Section 8 would pay the rest. Because the unit I was renting was more than the voucher amount listed, I explained that I had advocated with HUD for a higher amount to rent a unit accessible to me as a person with my disability.

After she was agreeable, I said that Section 8 would need to inspect the property. I gave her a copy of the Section 8 list, and said that these are the things I noticed that Section 8 would want done. We then walked through the property to see if there was anything I had missed in the first walk-through. I offered to help make these repairs.

In the two places that I have rented under Section 8, I took a risk that Section 8 says not to do. I put down money before Section 8 inspected the property. Since it is extremely challenging to find housing that is accessible for people with multiple chemical sensitivity, I think this was a reasonable risk, because I probably would have lost the places to other renters otherwise. But that is a judgment call each person would need to make on their own. A friend of mine was successful when she did not put down money, but her apartment was not in as much demand as the guesthouses I have rented.

I offered to put down the security deposit, and to pay the rent for the time period from that day until the day I thought it would pass the Section 8 inspection. I had borrowed money and had it in my checking account in order to be able to do this. After taking care of the finances, we filled out the request for tenancy form. Because of my disability, the head inspector would be doing the inspection. I had talked to him in the past. I put his name and extension on the instructions for the landlord page from Section 8. And before my landlady made the call for the inspection, I made a courtesy call to him and to my caseworker to let them know I had found a unit and my landlady would be calling for an inspection.

Resources

People needing advice on how to get Section 8 to allow them to rent a unit in which the rent is higher than they normally allow in order to find a unit accessible to them as a person with a disability can contact:

Director of Disability Policy
Office of the Secretary, US HUD, Room 10174
451 7th St. SW, Washington, DC 20410

Phone: 202-708-0614 x 6633

Fax: 202-708-4373

People needing loans for their moving needs, like security deposits, might try the Hebrew Free Loan Association of Tucson. Loans are available to Jews and non-Jews alike. An individual can borrow up to \$1,200 interest-free and must demonstrate an ability to repay the loan, and also have two local co-signers.

Hebrew Free Loan Association of Tucson

P.O. Box 44267, Tucson, AZ 85733

Phone: (520) 326-5736

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