



Oregon's Section 8 policy complicates housing search for Poppy Michell, Gladstone single mother of 3 boys

Published: Sunday, June 12, 2011, 11:00 PM Updated: Monday, June 13, 2011, 3:34 PM



By **Yuxing Zheng, The Oregonian**



Bruce Ely/The Oregonian

It took Poppy Michell of Gladstone 10 years to get a federal Section 8 housing voucher. Now, the single mother of three boys is struggling to meet the 120-day deadline to find a new rental. Many landlords tell her they simply do not accept the vouchers, a practice allowed under an exception to Oregon's fair-housing laws.

GLADSTONE – The phone calls last only a few minutes, ending with a similar line.

"I'm sorry, but we don't accept Section 8."

Poppy Michell, an unemployed single mother of three boys, spent 10 years on the waiting list before getting one of 45 federal Section 8 housing vouchers offered this spring in **Clackamas County**. She and her boys live in a cramped, two-bedroom apartment in Gladstone with minimal furniture, a worn-out sofa, and neatly folded clothes stacked in piles on the floor or stored in plastic bins.

Based on her income, Michell, 30, qualified for a Section 8 federal subsidy of \$1,226 a month to pay for rent and utilities, as long as she could find a place in Clackamas County within 120 days. Michell immediately started looking for that dream house with a yard where her boys could play. But now, less than two weeks before her June 24 deadline, she has only a few leads for two- or three-bedroom apartments.

"I've called a million places, and you can't even get past a phone call," Michell says. "The only trick I can think of is to get them to meet you first, so they can see I have all my teeth, I'm not picking scabs, I can have a conversation."

Oregon bans housing discrimination against people who receive government subsidies, such as Social Security or unemployment insurance, with one exception: federal rent subsidies. A bill sponsored by Rep. **Tina Kotek**, a North Portland Democrat, would have banned the practice, but **the bill died in committee in the 2009 Oregon Legislature**. At least eight states and various

What is Section 8?

A federal housing program administered through local housing authorities that provides vouchers to low-income households to pay

cities and counties prohibit the practice, according to research from the Oregon Law Center in 2008.

The **Metro Multifamily Housing Association**, a group representing property managers, opposed the bill. Landlords worried that it would require onerous paperwork or force them to accept tenants who wouldn't consistently pay the rent or fulfill the requirements of a one-year lease, said Deborah Imse, executive director.

"We do not consider Section 8 vouchers a source of income," Imse said. "We consider them a program with requirements attached to them and, as such, should be a voluntary thing for landlords."

Michell keeps searching. She drives around looking for "For Rent" signs. She scans Craigslist and the Sunday classifieds, and she gets discouraged. "I feel like a loser, because I can't find a place," she says.

She frets. She throws her hands up. She starts crying in public.

"If I don't do this within 120 days, I'm going to lose the voucher," she says. "What's going to happen to my family? I have not stopped crying."

About a month into her search, Michell finds a two-bedroom apartment, but it's not her ideal house. She picks up the marked-up classifieds section from the Sunday paper. In the first column of rental properties, only five are in Clackamas County. Two are too pricey, two don't take Section 8 and the fifth was already rented when Michell called the next morning.

In the second column, two places qualify. One is too pricey. The second doesn't take Section 8. Soon, there are no more columns for rentals.

Her kids, meanwhile, are excited about the prospect of a new home, maybe one with a pool. "I want to play with my friends," Hammer Michell, 6, says. "We would play a lot, like guns. We would play tag."

A better way

In housing parlance, officials call it the "turn back rate," the percentage of voucher recipients who, at the end of their 120 days, return the voucher to the housing authority because they failed to find a suitable place that passed an inspection by the housing authority.

for qualified housing. Participants are generally required to pay 30 percent of their adjusted gross income toward rent. Demand for Section 8 vouchers far outstrips supply.

Multnomah County

(Home Forward): Offers 8,406 vouchers. Waiting list, which is closed, has 1,450 names. In fall 2006, a two-week opening attracted 9,800 applicants. Officials estimate it will be several years before list is reopened.

Clackamas County:

Offers 1,542 vouchers. Waiting list, which has been closed since 2009, has 5,103 names. Estimated wait time is 10 years.

Washington

County: Offers 2,610 vouchers. Waiting list has 5,875 names. Estimated wait time is four to six years for those homeless, disabled, and applicants who meet other "preference" criteria. Wait time for others estimated to be more than 10 years.

—Yuxing Zheng

The **Housing Authority of Clackamas County** expects a turn back rate from Michell's group this spring to hover around 10 percent. In 2003-04, the turn back rate was about 9.5 percent, rising to 16 percent in 2006.

"Anecdotally, what we hear a lot is that people spend much of their time looking for that single-family home and run out of time," said Trell Anderson, executive director of the housing authority. "Multifamily properties, especially properties that aren't situated well in the market, there's more often a financial incentive for the landlord to accept vouchers."

The **Housing Authority of Portland**, now known as **Home Forward**, struggled with a turn back rate that hit 28 percent in 2007. To foster more success, the agency focused on a number of voluntary initiatives, including offering more personal assistance, speeding up payments and creating a \$400,000 mitigation fund for landlords in case of damaged property. That fund has "hardly even been tapped," said Jill Riddle, the agency's rent assistance director.

As of about nine months ago, Portland's turn back rate had improved to about 7 percent. But the Housing Authority of Clackamas County is much smaller and doesn't have the money for a mitigation fund, Anderson said.

Kotek, the North Portland state representative, believes a legislative ban on Section 8 discrimination is a necessary piece of the solution, though landlords should still be allowed to reject applicants for insufficient incomes and other reasons. In that case, Kotek's bill might not help Michell. She has little income and two evictions in her rental history, the last one seven years ago.

Kotek said she may reintroduce the bill in a future session, calling the Section 8 exemption "incredibly unfair."

"It's often times used as a hidden proxy to discriminate based on race or ethnicity," she said. You can just say, "I don't want to take Section 8."

Mistakes, bad luck

Michell is frank about her mistakes that contributed to her situation.

The Oak Grove native dropped out of Rex Putnam High School her freshman or sophomore year before obtaining her GED in 1998. She worked a string of mostly service jobs and attempted classes at Clackamas Community College but didn't finish. At 18, she found herself pregnant with her first son, Brayden Loney, now 11. She also has Hammer, whose father she separated from, and Erik Mauseth, 5.

"I didn't plan on having my kids and bringing them into poverty," she says. "I wouldn't trade the kids for anything, but I'd rather have waited until I could take care of them."



Bruce Ely/The Oregonian

Michell longs to find a house with a yard where her boys, including Hammer Michell, 6, (left) and Erik Mausest, 5, can play. For now, they use whatever space they can find in and around their mother's spartan two-bedroom apartment.

She has suffered through spots of bad luck as well: a broken left leg in October 2009, a job as a checkout clerk lost when an Oregon City grocery store closed, a painful intestinal hernia this spring that required emergency surgery.

Michell and the boys survive by patching together \$605 in monthly food stamps, \$288 in child support for Erik, Oregon Health Plan insurance, utility bill assistance, and the good graces of family and friends, who also help with watching the children and other tasks. Her \$480 in monthly unemployment ran out three weeks ago and she's borrowing to cover her \$750 monthly rent until she moves with her voucher.

"Everybody thinks you're poor, you're trash, so we don't want to deal with you," she says. "It makes me feel dirty. I'm no Bill Gates, sorry."

As tired and dejected as she sometimes feels, Michell refuses to give up searching for her ideal house to raise her boys. "It's for them," she said. "They don't deserve this life at all. They didn't do anything wrong. This voucher is everything. I mean, everything."

-- Yuxing Zheng

© 2011 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.