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Proposed Changes to Rental Assistance Program Spells Trouble for the Working Poor

Section 8 Program Benefits More than 2 Million Households

by J. Thomas Mullen

An alarming shift in America's housing policy is about to harm hundreds of thousands of low-income households. These households – ninety percent of which are seniors, disabled persons, or families with children – are among the 6 million households in our country that have severe affordable housing needs and live at the edge of homelessness.

To alleviate their housing hardships, two million families have relied on the Housing Choice (Section 8) Voucher Program, a long-established and effective federal effort that provides rental housing assistance to Americans with extremely low incomes.

For 30 years, this vital program has offered support to families that rent apartments in the private market. The great majority of Section 8 renters live below the federal poverty line (about \$18,000 for a family of four) and pay 30 percent of their incomes toward the rent. With voucher assistance, families are able to live in modest, decent housing in neighborhoods that are safe for themselves and their children.

At **Catholic Charities of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese**, we confront the consequence of high housing costs every day, as dozens of families and individuals turn to us for food, shelter, or other forms of emergency assistance. We at Catholic Charities have seen a 65 percent increase in basic needs request in the past five years. Housing issues for people in Northeast Ohio during the past year constituted more than 60 percent of all basic need requests, which includes food, clothing, furniture and health needs. This trend in housing needs represents a 53 percent increase in this five-year period.

In February, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) proposed major changes to Section 8. First, HUD has requested a \$1 billion cut in Section 8 funding for 2005. Second, HUD has proposed to eliminate rules that give priority for Section 8 assistance to extremely low income households and ensure that housing costs will remain affordable for families participating in the program. Finally, HUD has recommended that Section 8 funding be restructured as a block grant, which means that assistance would no longer keep pace with rising housing costs.

HUD argues that the Section 8 program costs too much and that the proposed changes will not harm families that depend on Section 8 assistance. Yet to rescue costs in the way proposed by HUD is a false economy and, worse, a betrayal of our imperative to assist those in need. If HUD's proposals are authorized by Congress, as many as 250,000 families could lose their voucher assistance in the coming year. In the long run, the changes proposed by HUD would dramatically reduce assistance to extremely low income families, those with the most severe affordable housing needs. Some of these households unable to pay the rent without help from Section 8 would lose their homes.

We must remember, Section 8 is not a giveaway program. It is an assistance program. The people who take part in the Section 8 program are our neighbors; they hold down jobs, raise families and make positive contributions to the community. They are seniors and persons with disabilities struggling to live with dignity on fixed incomes. They are parents with prohibitive housing costs confronting monthly budget shortages and are often unable to afford reliable child care, medical care or transportation – even adequate food and clothing. To alter the successful Section 8 program in ways proposed by HUD would be to turn our backs on these families.

The consequences of these proposals are easy to predict. Extremely low-income households – those with the most severe affordable housing needs – will receive less housing assistance. In our eight-county Catholic Charities Cleveland Catholic Diocese, 2,718 households would lose this assistance in 2005 and 6,521 households by 2009.

The following table represents, by county, the eight counties within Catholic Charities Cleveland Catholic Diocese and how the cuts would affect each:

	Number of Authorized Vouchers as of July 2003	Reduction in Number of Families Assisted In 2005	Reduction in Number of Families Assisted In 2009
Akron/Summit County	3,983	483	1,159
Ashland County*			
Cuyahoga County	12,859	1,559	3,741
Geauga County	171	21	50
Lake County	1,358	165	395
Lorain County	2,695	327	784
Medina County	506	61	147
Wayne County	842	102	245

*Does not receive Section 8 funding

The central promise of our Catholic teaching is that society as a whole is responsible for the common good and all major sectors of society – the market, the government and private organizations, both religious and secular – have obligations in the face of people suffering from poverty.

It is, therefore, a responsibility of our federal government to address the reality of poverty, and this responsibility is not limited to what can be done through religious or other private organizations. Our government has distinct, independent duties to the welfare of individuals in society.

In addition, it is the least among us who have the greatest claim on our resources, according to Catholic teaching. When budgets are tight, the needs of the most vulnerable members of our society must be met first.

To that end, we call on Congress to fully fund Section 8 in 2005 and to oppose any Section 8 program changes that would reduce assistance to the families with extremely low incomes and the most severe affordable housing needs.

Not so long ago, the Bush administration called on local officials, charities and faith-based organizations to band together to end homelessness in their communities. This is a bold and noble goal – yet it is a goal that can be met only by strengthening, not weakening, successful affordable housing programs like Section 8.

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