

Source of Income discrimination..... the reality of Section 8

by Kayla Miranda

When Section 8 vouchers are the topic of any given “affordable housing” conversation, there seems to be an almost fairy tale version readily available. “With a voucher you can get a house with a yard! You can live anywhere in the city! It’s all your choice!” It is, after all, called the Housing Choice Voucher Program. But much like our most beloved fairy tales, there is the happy “Disney” version and the much darker “Grimm” version. Unfortunately for many voucher holders, the latter is closer to reality.

The truth is there are about 14,800 low-income families in San Antonio that have vouchers to help them with their rental costs, either through the San Antonio Housing Authority

or the Housing Authority of Bexar County, and an additional 14,600 households are on the waitlist. Only 2,287 owners rent to households that receive vouchers from SAHA. Just because you get a voucher doesn’t mean you will be able to find a rental unit to accept it. Another fact that is left out is Section 8 landlords have different qualifications. They can have stricter policies and be more selective of the tenants they choose to rent to than public housing units. Everything from background checks to rental history is at their discretion, much like a market rate landlord. Many owners and property managers simply chose not to accept a voucher.

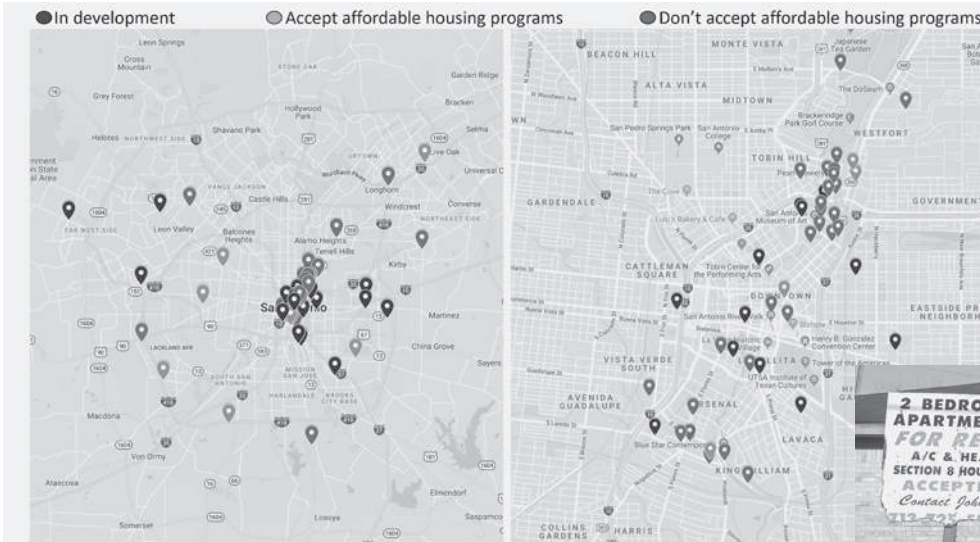
In Texas, any landlord can decide whether or not they want to accept a renter’s source of income. In fact, Texas joins Indiana as the only two states in the country that have explicitly prohibited cities from passing Source of Income discrimination ordinances. This means a landlord can deny any tenant housing, even if they are perfectly capable of paying rent, just because their payments come from social security payments, child support payments, federally funded vouchers and any income that is not from a job. This is a roadblock for many renters in San Antonio. You would think that money is money. Imagine walking into a grocery store with a crisp \$100 bill and your cashier asks you, where did you get that? Is it from an employer? Well if it’s from Social Security I can’t accept it. That sounds ludicrous doesn’t it? As long as a person is capable of producing the monthly rent payment, that payment should be accepted. SAHA has recently discovered that only 28

out of every 50 housing choice voucher recipients ever actually finds a home because of all the obstacles mentioned above.

Some would argue that anyone should be able to decide who they allow to live within their property. Even if that means excluding individuals based on source of income. So let’s take a typical landlord out of the equation and just focus on those land-

lords who accept tax dollars from the city and county. Is it acceptable for a developer to accept city funds and city grants for development but refuse to accept tax dollars for rental payments?

Programs like Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone, or TIRZ, are designated as a response to a community need identified by the city.



Section 8 vouchers can only be used in certain areas and only if the owner’s requirements are met.



Affordable housing is always a need in any community. So those landlords should be required to accept vouchers and any income that is legal in order to address that need.

Locally, a source of income discrimination policy requiring entities who accept incentives or assistance from the city be prohibited from discriminating based on source of income has passed the Housing Commission, but met resistance from the apartment associations in the Planning and Development Committee. It is now set to go to City Council B session. If this policy passes both B session and A session, all new developments who accept city assistance going forward would be required to open up this much needed housing to low income individuals that were previously denied access for the period of time that is tied to the investment. For example, if the incentive lasts for 30 years, that is how long they can not discriminate. It would remove one of the many barriers to affordable housing for thousands of households. There is never a single solution that will solve everyone’s problems. The only way to solve something as large as the housing crisis is to target multiple obstacles simultaneously. The best way to help with this particular subject is to sign up to speak at public comment or to contact your council representative. Hope to “see” you there!

BIO: Kayla Miranda, a housing justice advocate organizing in the Westside of San Antonio resides at the Alazan/Apache Courts.