



CHA asking more tenants to work

Adults must enroll in school or find job, if proposal passes

By Sara Olkon
Tribune staff reporter

The Chicago Housing Authority plans to extend its controversial work rules to traditional public housing tenants and Section 8 families as soon as next year, officials say.

Under the new proposal, all able adults would eventually have to work or attend school for 20 hours a week. Traditional public housing residents who don't make a good faith effort to meet the standard—15 hours a week of work or study next year, building to 20 hours by 2010—could be subject to eviction proceedings beginning next July.

The new rules would dramatically expand requirements first introduced in mixed-income developments that opened in 2005. In general, to qualify for apartments in those sought-after complexes, adults had to prove they were working or training

for work 30 hours a week.

Critics said that pushed those who could not, or would not, find work into the less desirable traditional CHA housing, or into the private housing voucher program known as Section 8.

The new plan would apply similar standards to those much larger populations.

In the first stage, affecting only traditional housing residents, as many as 5,000 adults would have to comply, according to CHA officials. That proposal will be the subject of a public hearing next Wednesday and will come before the CHA board for a vote on Nov. 20.

Plans to extend work requirements to Section 8 tenants have not been formalized, but officials say they would like to move quickly to apply similar standards. Initial estimates suggest that tens of thousands of families might be affected in that program.

"My view is, you've got to pay some rent, or actively try to find work," said Mary Wiggins, chairman of the CHA's main tenant organization, the

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Central Advisory Council, and a CHA commissioner. "You have to get up and do something."

But critics of the plan fear that the added requirement will hurt an already-vulnerable population and even leave some families homeless.

"To impose eviction as a penalty for failure to comply with a work requirement is draconian," said Richard Wheelock, housing supervisory attorney at the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago. This "should be the housing of last resort for the poorest of the poor."

Similarly, Francine Washington, 52, said she fears the proposal will "railroad" residents.

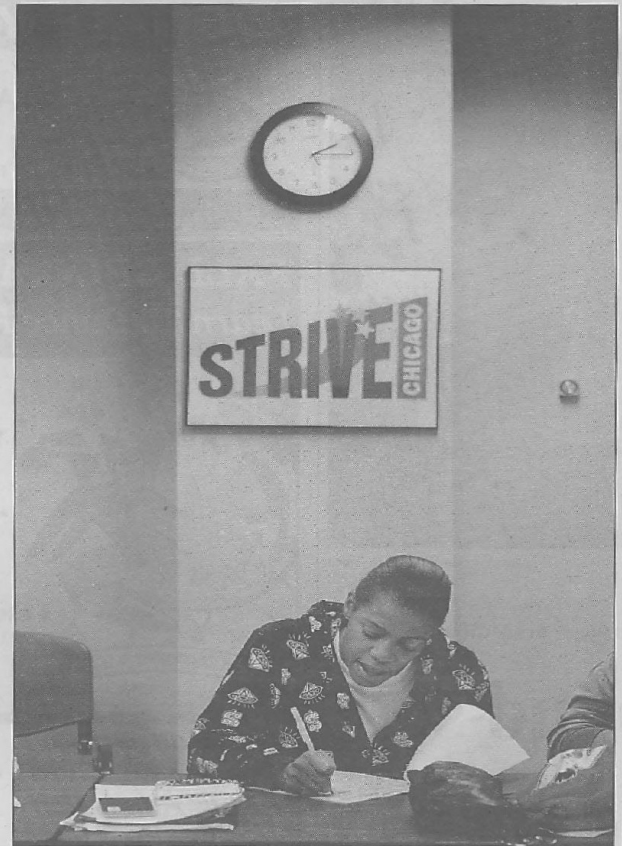
"I think over half of them will have trouble," said Washington, the president of Stateway Gardens' Local Advisory Council, which will cease to exist at the end of the year because the complex has been demolished. She lives in a CHA townhouse nearby and has lived in public housing for the last 30 years.

CHA officials say that the plan is designed to help, not hurt, families. They built in a safe harbor clause that, among other things, allows families to remain in housing as long as eligible adults are making a good-faith attempt at finding work. Also, "service connectors" will be on hand to help tenants find job training, drug treatment services or child care.

"All we are saying is that we want to have you become engaged in the world in work," said Gloria Seabrook, a CHA special assistant who monitors families living in mixed-income communities. "We've always had people who worked in public housing."

CHA officials point to the success they've already had with work requirements in its mixed-income developments. When they first proposed the rules in 2004, the idea provoked a storm of criticism from tenant advocates in Chicago and across the nation.

But Bryan Zises, a spokesman



Tribune photo by Abel Uribe

Deborah Thomas learns about applying for a job with the help of Strive, which helps Chicago residents find a job. Strive's services could be more in demand if a CHA proposal passes.

for the CHA, said "fewer than a dozen" of the approximately 1,500 public housing residents who moved into the mixed-income communities under the 30-hour employment provision have left.

It is impossible to say how many tenants might have been dissuaded from moving in because of the requirement, but CHA officials say those who made the move have benefited from the challenge. Seabrook said she has seen a marked improvement in the lives of families when adults in their lives commit to work.

"People who work are healthier and they take better care of themselves," she said. "People who have begun to work have less issues. We have less problems with their children."

William Wilen, director of housing litigation for the Chicago-based Sargent Shriver Center on Poverty Law, has a more ambivalent view of the proposal.

"It's a very important experiment that the CHA is trying," he said. "They do have a safe harbor clause that allows people who are trying to remain in good stead as long they are making an effort to become engaged."

Still, he said he was concerned that the plan might sweep too broadly.

"We are dealing with a group of families who have had serious disadvantages all their lives," Wilen said.

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