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## CHA votes to expand resident work requirements

By Sara Olkon | Tribune reporter  
May 1, 2008

A sweeping new work requirement that could change the lives of many of Chicago's poorest residents was embraced Wednesday by the [Chicago Housing Authority](#) Board of Commissioners.

The vote is the latest in a series of CHA policy changes designed to reshape public housing. Instead of a permanent home for the poor, the agency hopes the public—and residents—will view its housing as a temporary way station for people who need to get back on their feet.

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Beginning this fall, most adults living in traditional public housing could face eviction if they do not begin looking for work or attending school. For some 5,000 adults, this means making a good-faith effort to meet the new standard—15 hours a week of work or study this fall, building to 20 hours by 2010.

Wednesday's unanimous vote had been widely anticipated. And although critics have claimed the measure is too harsh, one board member drew on her own experience in asserting that a work requirement is the best way to go.

"It's really about accountability," CHA Commissioner Sandra Young said after the meeting. "We need to be in a position to encourage residents to move to another level."

At 19, Young was a high-school drop-out and single mother of two kids. She received government assistance and lived at the Wells Homes, a public housing development in the Oakland neighborhood on the South Side.

Young said she was able to pull herself out of a hard situation by enrolling in free, basic skills classes. She said she got off welfare in 1989.

Today, she owns a home in nearby Oakwood Shores and works for the [Chicago Park District](#) as a program facilitator.

"Never sell yourself short," Young said.

Wednesday's vote marks a dramatic expansion of the work requirements previously limited to mixed-income developments that have opened since 2005. To qualify for apartments in those more desirable complexes, most adults had to prove they were working or training 30 hours a week.

Today, more than 2,000 families are living in CHA's mixed-income communities.

"The big problem with applying work requirements to traditional public housing is that

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it's the housing of last resort," said William Wilen, director of housing litigation for the Chicago-based Sargent Shriver Center on Poverty Law.

Aaron "Lefty" Boyd, 36, an activist and a lifetime resident of the Ickes Homes on the [Near South Side](#), he said he fears CHA officials aren't sincere about wanting to help residents succeed.

"It's just another way for them to get out of the poor business," Boyd said. "They know the majority won't be able to abide the rules, and they will [evict] them. They are just trying to get rid of us to make way for the Olympics."

Boyd, for his part, volunteers full time organizing youth programs in the area. Under the plan, such work can count for half of one's total hours for the first two years.

The work rules also include several exceptions, such as an automatic exemption for primary caretakers for the first year of a child's life. After that, a parent will have to place the child in day care while looking for a job or attending classes.

Some housing advocates have suggested the plan violates a state child-welfare law that says state or local government agencies cannot force a single parent of any child younger than 6 to work if the job would "unreasonably interfere" with child-care responsibilities.

CHA officials say they are confident that the plan would hold up in court, if challenged.

Also exempt from the work rules are disabled adults, retired workers receiving a pension and anyone older than 61. The youngest residents covered under the rules are 17-year-olds who have dropped out of school.

The CHA plans to extend similar work requirements to a larger population, tenants who use Section 8 vouchers to rent private apartments.

The work rule was among a several federal recommendations adopted by the board Wednesday. The board also voted to eliminate tenant councils at the new, mixed-income housing developments. Created in 1971, the tenant councils are made up of members elected from and by the residents of each development.

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