

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT SECTION 8

By Roxanne Vierra, King County Office of Civil Rights

What is Section 8?

The Section 8 program, also known as the Housing Choice Voucher Program, is a federal government program that assists very low-income families, the elderly and tenants with disabilities to afford housing in the private housing market. This assistance comes in the form of rental subsidies, limiting the monthly rent payment of the assistance recipient. Local housing authorities administer the program. Many housing providers accept Section 8 because it is a dependable revenue stream and Section 8 tenants tend to be better than average.

In unincorporated King County and the cities of Seattle and Bellevue, participation in the Section 8 Program is a "protected class" – just like race, sex, national origin, disability, religion and other groups.

Myth – There no good low-income tenants – they all trash property, and don't pay their rent.

Fact – Being low income doesn't mean you don't care about the place where you and your family live. The Section 8 Program expects the tenant to comply with the lease and program requirements, to pay his or her share of the rent on time, and to maintain the rental in good condition. If a Section 8 tenant causes property damage or fails to make rental payments, they can be evicted like any other resident.

There will always be a few tenants who don't respect property rights and tenancy rules - some who have Section 8 vouchers and many who don't. But there is a solid core of lower-income folks who will follow tenancy rules and often remain in a rental house or apartment for several years.

Myth – It's okay to screen Section 8 applicants differently from the way we screen other applicants.

Fact – When an applicant with a Section 8 voucher applies for a rental house or apartment, you should apply your normal non-discriminatory rental criteria and use your regular screening process.

Note that these low-income applicants will not meet a "3 times the rent" income criteria, so consider calculating their percentage of rent to income using the portion of the rent that they actually pay. Section 8 applicants who are otherwise qualified cannot be denied rental simply because they have a Housing Choice Voucher (in those jurisdictions where they are a protected class).

Myth – The Section 8 Program expects us to make a lot of repairs.

Fact – When a tenant who has a Section 8 voucher locates and qualifies for an available rental, the housing authority conducts an inspection to ensure that it meets acceptable health and safety standards. The housing provider is expected to maintain the apartment in a decent, safe and sanitary manner throughout the duration of the tenancy.

Myth – The Section 8 process is a lot of work.

Fact – When the unit passes inspection, a contract and one-year lease are immediately signed and rent payments begin. The housing authority and the tenant each pay their respective portions of the rent directly to the housing provider where the total of both equal the total rent charged for that apartment. The housing provider is expected to provide services agreed to as part of the lease.

Myth – Payments from the Housing Authority can stop without warning.

Fact – As a rule, Section 8 does not "quit" or "fail to pay" without reason or notice. A housing provider who experiences problems receiving a Section 8 payment should contact the local housing authority to determine if or when payment should be made.

Myth – We can avoid renting to Section 8 tenants by refusing to offer one-year leases.

Fact – In the jurisdictions where Section 8 is a protected class, this action will likely be viewed as discriminatory. A housing provider must have a legitimate business reason for refusing to rent to any protected class group of people.