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List for rental assistance opens up

First time since '06 for Newark to take Section 8 applications

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NEWARK -- Hundreds of people lined up outside the housing authority here as early as 6 a.m. Tuesday, hoping to score a hard-to-get voucher for rental assistance.

The list of applicants topped 475 by early afternoon, but officials expect just 25 to 50 families will ultimately receive one of the federally funded Section 8 vouchers, as demand far exceeds availability.

Among those waiting Tuesday was Beverly Hinson of Newark, who stood outside from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., she said.

It was the first time she and her husband, Kermith, applied for a housing assistance. Kermith went back to school after the couple was laid off from Chrysler four years ago; then Beverly lost her job at BJ's Wholesale Club earlier this month.

"When we both had jobs, everything was OK," said Kermith, who worries about paying the $1,365 rent for their town house off East Chestnut Hill Road. "I just need some help for a little while while I finish school."

Also in the crowd was Zhiqun Li, a part-time cafeteria server at the University of Delaware who spends $400 of her $700 monthly income to rent a room in Newark.

"It's just hard to get a full-time job. Anytime I apply, they don't need me," said Li, who's also on a waiting list for public housing in Wilmington.

Tenants around the state often wait months or years for an available voucher or public-housing unit.

The Newark Housing Authority had not accepted applications for its Section 8 program since June 2006, when officials closed the waiting list, said Marene M. Jordan, executive director. The authority's waiting list for its public housing units also is closed to all applicants except the elderly.

The authority purged its Section 8 waiting list in April and advertised it would be accepting new applicants two weeks ago, Jordan said. The office will accept pre-applications from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. today at its Main Street office.

Newark residents, the elderly and applicants with children, disabilities or military service receive preference in the program, which costs roughly $800,000 a year.

"Many of these folks are in dire circumstances -- no money, no savings, no job. They have no base for moving up," said Syl Woolford, chair of the authority board of commissioners.

With a voucher, tenants pay up to 40 percent of their gross monthly income in rent from a private landlord. The landlord receives the balance of the rent from the housing authority.

In Newark, voucher-holders compete with 7,500 students living off campus, who help inflate the cost of rental units, said Paul Baumbach, an authority commissioner.

"When there's out-of-state college students whose parents are willing to pay more rent, the landlords want the full freight," rather than the rental caps imposed by Section 8 guidelines, he said.

The state's five housing authorities receive just a fraction of the Section 8 vouchers they would need to serve the thousands of Delaware families who qualify for assistance. There's neither enough vouchers nor affordable housing units, housing officials and advocates say.

An estimated 28,000 low-income families in Delaware spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, according to a recent Delaware Housing Coalition report. Among those, nearly 14,300 are low-income renters paying more than half their income for housing.

"Almost all the waiting lists are closed, and the ones that are open to elderly for housing are almost two years long," said Gina Miserendino, grassroots policy specialist for the coalition, an advocacy group in Dover.

"In other parts of the country it's even worse. But we don't want to have a contest about it."