

“Forget About the Section 8 Voucher and Keep Your Public Housing” A Message from a Section 8 Resident who is Experiencing Displacement through Section 8



Sahrooni, photographed at left outside her home, is a Somali immigrant, a young mother of two, and a Section 8 voucher recipient. She moved to the Twin Cities from Boston about 4 years ago, and currently lives with her two children at the Normandale Lake Estates apartment complex in Bloomington. However, for the second time in two years, Sahrooni is being forced to move after new owners purchased the building and evicted tenants in order to “flip” the building. The new owners have told residents that they will no longer be accepting Section 8. Adding to the trauma, stress, and financial burden that accompanies this kind of housing instability, Sahrooni and other Section 8 voucher holders face a frightening prospect: Section 8 requires that voucher holders find housing within three months or forfeit their voucher.

For many voucher holders, a loss of their voucher means a loss of housing altogether. These Section 8 voucher holders choose to remain in the program in spite of the constant threat of eviction and upheaval because their only alternative is homelessness. According to MPR, when the Metropolitan Council opened their Section 8 waiting list in 2015, they received over 36,000 applications for 2,000 spots.¹ This is a reflection not of the program’s effectiveness, but of the depth of the housing crisis.

Sahrooni has agreed to share her story with Defend Glendale & Public Housing Coalition so that we can bring her knowledge and experience to a broader audience. Sahrooni feels strongly that the Section 8 program does not work for residents like her. Given MPHA’s current plans to privatize public housing and replace it with the Section 8 program, her story is a critically important one.

“It Makes Me Not Want To Live Here Anymore”

Sahrooni had been living at the Crossroads at Penn apartment complex in Richfield with her family for about a year when she and around 670 other renters were evicted in late 2015. In a case that has become well publicized, Sahrooni and her fellow tenants were displaced when new owners purchased the building and rebranded it as “The Concierge.” Sahrooni had an eight day old daughter when she was given her 30-day notice to vacate. “It was discrimination. He (the new owner) wanted young white people to live there, not families and Section 8 holders, or Africans, and Latinx people.”

Although Sahrooni and other displaced residents did receive \$1,500 from a settlement negotiated with the building’s new owners by the Housing Justice Center and Homeline, it didn’t even cover her costs. “I had to pay a deposit, I had to pay the movers. It cost \$2,500.” Making

¹ <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/07/18/minnesota-section8-housing-lottery-dakota-county-rental>

this worse, Sahrooni just received payment earlier this year, more than two years after her move. “It was a ripoff,” she says, pointing out how much of the settlement went to lawyers and developers rather than the displaced tenants.

A few months after their eviction, Sahrooni and her family (along with other families from Crossroads) moved into the Normandale Lake Estates apartment complex in Bloomington.

But less than two years after they moved to their new home, Sahrooni received notice that her new home, Normandale Lake Estates, had been purchased, and that she had 30 days to vacate. “It was horrible. When you move in, after a year you find out this place has been sold. It makes me not want to live here anymore”. Although Sahrooni has negotiated an extension not to be displaced right away while she searches for a new home, the notice had the desired effect. The buildings now sit almost entirely empty while the new owners begin to remodel the buildings in order to justify the \$300-\$400 monthly rent increase. “I feel depressed and sad,” she says.

She worries about other residents who were displaced. “I’m healthy and I’m a strong woman and I know that I can do this, but other people are disabled.” She tells us about a family she knows who had to move away. “They couldn’t afford the rent, so they moved to Green Bay. But right now I am helping them find a new place. The mother is blind, the daughter is disabled, and the other has mental illness. They can’t find a home. I am trying to help them find a place they can call home.”

Like many other low-income tenants, Sahrooni works hard to help her fellow tenants find homes, even as she herself struggles to find housing. If Sahrooni is unable to find housing by September, she will be homeless. If that were to happen, she would face the additional threat of losing her Section 8 voucher.



Photograph of Normandale Lake Estates

When asked about how Section 8 works, Sahrooni is clear. “It doesn’t work. How can you save money when every two years you have to move?” Sahrooni has two young children, but her constant upheaval prevents her from finding childcare for her children. She fears how this instability may impact her children as they get older and become aware of what is going on.

Her experience is mirrored across the nation, as more and more Section 8 voucher recipients struggle to find and keep housing with their vouchers. Studies conducted around the country show that large percentages of Section 8 voucher recipients are forced to give up their voucher

because they are unable to find housing using it. One study in California found that up to 64% of Section 8 voucher recipients had to give up their voucher². Even those who find housing are not safe. Sahrooni's experience demonstrates how Section 8 voucher recipients can be displaced if their building owner decides to sell it off to investors who raise the rent.

Compounding this problem is the racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia Sahrooni, a Somali immigrant, faces. During her search for a new home, Sahrooni viewed or called 15-20 apartments. She sometimes faced hostility and discrimination. She recounts one experience at a building in South Minneapolis where a property manager kept requesting more and more documentation, always telling her they needed more documents, even when she provided what they asked for. When Minneapolis' new ordinance barring discrimination against Section 8 voucher holders was overturned, this manager told Sahrooni that because they were no longer required to accept Section 8 voucher holders, they would not accept her application. "It was discrimination," she says.

Sahrooni's story is just one story among thousands. Across the Twin Cities and across the nation, more and more low-income residents are finding that the Section 8 program does not work as advertised.

A Brief History of the Section 8 Program

The Section 8 program was created in 1974 when Gerald Ford signed the Housing and Community Development Act (HCDA) into law.³ Although Section 8 is often described as a subsidy for low-income households, the program actually subsidizes landlords, who receive Section 8 payments directly from the government. Under the program, renters originally paid 25% (raised to 30% in 1981) of their income in rent, with the government paying the difference between that amount and a predetermined "Fair Market Rent" (FMR).

The act was written in response to Richard Nixon's moratorium on HUD spending in early 1973, motivated by his opposition to public housing. Deciding "to shift housing policy away from the large production programs," Nixon proposed instead "direct housing allowances for low-income citizens."⁴ With the spending moratorium as leverage, Richard Nixon's administration negotiated the HCDA, which was signed by Gerald Ford less than two weeks after he took office. According to the New York Times, the New York HUD Director revealed another motivation for the Section 8 program: wealthy communities often fought against proposed public housing buildings and homes in their neighborhoods.⁵ In other words, wealthy white neighborhoods did not want low-income housing in their neighborhoods, a dynamic which continues to perpetuate income and racial segregation. The voluntary nature of the Section 8 voucher program was intended to negate this issue.

From the beginning, Section 8 had its critics. A 1973 New York Times article outlining Nixon's housing agenda (including a new focus on vouchers rather than building and providing housing directly), includes a quote from the well known African American Civil Rights lawyer Percy Sutton who described the plan to move to a voucher system as putting "the slum landlord on

²<https://www.ocregister.com/2016/10/05/no-voucher-no-vacancy-no-help-the-cruel-realities-of-section-8-housing-in-orange-county/>

³<http://nlihc.org/article/40-years-ago-august-22-president-ford-signs-housing-and-community-development-act-1974>

⁴ http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/w12-5_von_hoffman.pdf

⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/09/29/archives/nixons-housing-policy-opponents-say-proposal-for-cash-payments-wont.html>

welfare,” adding that because the program “does nothing to increase the available supply of decent housing,” rent levels would go up.⁶ Because of this opposition, the Section 8 program still built or rehabbed new units in order to increase the supply of affordable housing. It wasn’t until Ronald Reagan’s administration that the full-fledged voucher system we know today really began to take off, with a 1981 New York Times article characterizing Reagan’s approach as a “shift from new production subsidies to the voucher approach.”⁷ But since at least Nixon’s administration, the general trend in housing policy has been increased funding and emphasis on the Section 8 program for landlords and the private market, and declining emphasis and funding for public housing.

Understanding the history of Section 8 is important because it reveals a hidden truth: although the stated goal of the Section 8 program is to help low-income families find housing, the motivation underlying its creation was the termination of public housing in favor of a market-based housing program. Knowing this helps us make sense of how the program currently works (or, more accurately, *doesn’t* work) in the Twin Cities and around the nation.

MPHA’s Current Plans to Convert Public Housing to Section 8

In spite of the well documented issues with Section 8, desperate renters still flock the program. Meanwhile, MPHA has proposed a radical plan to “Change the Subsidy,” by moving all of the current residents in public housing, over 11,000 low-income people of color, 75% Black, Black Muslims, and disabled, elders, families with children that live in over 740 homes, 42 high-rise buildings, Glendale Townhomes and more, to Project Based Section 8 vouchers in order to sell 99.99% ownership of public housing buildings to private investors. The private developers will essentially get these buildings for free because they will apply for Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, other tax credits, and “affordable housing funds” from the City of Minneapolis, State, and Federal Government. History shows that these private owners will displace residents, just like what is happening to Sahrooni, and the thousands of residents who have Section 8 but can’t find housing. Since MPHA was not successful in displacing residents by directly selling their buildings, now they want to displace residents by using the Section 8 Voucher system by turning the buildings over to private owners. MPHA will then let the private owners displace and evict residents because MPHA will turn 99.99% of the control and ownership over to these private investors. At that point neither MPHA nor the City of Minneapolis, or any other government, will have any mechanism to prevent this crisis from happening. If MPHA does move to a Section 8 system, these Section 8 waitlists will be increased substantially, as MPHA would be taking vouchers away from households who have been on the waiting list for as long as 7 to 10 years. These vouchers will be given to public housing residents, which will displace them. This plan would be a disaster, and will change the City of Minneapolis forever for the worse.

⁶<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/09/29/archives/nixons-housing-policy-opponents-say-proposal-for-cash-payments-wont.html>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/18/realestate/us-cuts-back-and-shifts-course-on-housing-aid.html>

Sahrooni's Message

We asked Sahrooni if public housing residents should accept MPHA's plans and take Section 8 vouchers. She was adamant:

“No! Public housing is better. Forget about the Section 8 voucher and keep your public housing. If MPHA follow their plans, it will cause homelessness, people will lose their jobs and their home. They will not have their own place, they will not have an address. They will not have a community. It's going to be a crisis.”

“People say ‘Oh we don't take (the Section 8 voucher). We used to take it, but we don't anymore.’ They say it is because of paperwork but it is really discrimination. They want people to be homeless. It's really really bad. It's a crisis. I am blaming Donald Trump and Ben Carson.”

But Sahrooni's experience also shows that local politicians are complicit in this crisis. **“The DFL politicians are not protecting us. If they were, we would not be losing money and facing homelessness.”**

Conclusion

Section 8 is not working for low- income residents. Residents are forced to use Section 8 to avoid homelessness, but many are unable to find housing with their voucher. Those that do face evictions and uncertainty. Each time they are evicted, they risk losing their voucher and becoming homeless. The history of Section 8 shows how it was always designed to push people onto the private market by subsidizing landlords instead of providing housing for those in need. MPHA's plans supported by Mayor Jacob Frey are just the latest chapter in this long history. Minneapolis has the chance to save public housing, and to build new public housing for the future. Instead, they want to use the broken Section 8 program to privatize. But residents like Sahrooni are speaking out and sharing their story.

“I'm glad I'm talking about it. It's wrong what (the people who bought Crossroads and Normandale Lake Estates) did. No one said sorry. Thanks to Allah because I want others to hear. I want people to be able to protect themselves. People need to find out if their place is going to be sold. People need to know their rights.”

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