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How do you end poverty? Housing Authority of San Bernardino has a plan

Homeless don't have the stability to find and keep a job; program seeks to help those in need achieve independence

By Ryan Hagen, The Sun

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SAN BERNARDINO >> It's hard to get stable housing without a stable job. It's hard to get a stable job without stable housing.

That's the predicament that Elizabeth Pryer was in for years, squeezed into her mother's house in San Bernardino along with her five children, her sister, her brother-in-law and her niece.

Despite the stress of her living condition, Pryer combined her job search and intermittent employment with applications to the Housing Authority of the County of San Bernardino, and

in 2014 she lucked out.

Her family was one of about 1,500 chosen for the Housing Authority's five-year lease assistance program, giving her half the rent for a home in Highland with a bedroom for each of her children. They also helped her find work.

And they — specifically, Career Readiness Coordinator Janice Simmons-Rogers — gave her a much-needed emotional boost.

"I was looking for work, and I was getting very discouraged," said Pryer, 37. "(Simmons-Rogers) would tell me, 'You'll get something.' Then — boom, I was doing temp jobs, and after I took the temp jobs and studied as a (Certified Nursing Assistance), and now I'm working as a CNA."

No one is allowed to be in the program for more than five years, so the first cohort of participants terms out in April. But nearly 40 percent graduated before the final year without needing further assistance, according to Housing Authority statistics, and new qualifiers rotate in.

Pryer said she's on pace to exit in July, making her one of the roughly one-third who finish by Year 3.

"They help you know how to manage your money and be more responsible, so I'll be ready," she said. "I'm on track now."

San Bernardino County has one of 39 housing authorities — out of 3,400 such agencies in the United States — designated Moving to Work, allowing it to start the program in 2012, said Maria Razo, the Housing Authority's executive director.

“This is a demonstration program that allows us to design and test innovative, locally designed strategies to help reduce bureaucracy in housing programs, help program participants achieve economic independence and ensure families’ housing choice,” Razo said at a presentation in January. “This program is designed to help career able families achieve economic independence while they receive five years of housing assistance through the Voucher program. However, we knew we couldn’t do it alone: We are providers of affordable housing, not employment specialists.”

So they partnered with the county Workforce Development Department, which provided career counseling, employment services workshops, job referrals, and job skills enhancement services.

That helped 499 participating households find jobs by 2016, according to a report compiled at the end of last year.

The wages for those jobs ranged from \$9 to \$23.50 per hour, according to the report, and helped the household income of participants rise by an average of 21.5 percent over four years, according to the report.

Meanwhile, participants’ welfare use dropped by 37 percent, and the number without a high school degree dropped 35.5 percent, according to the Housing Authority.

There’s some stigma to accepting any government help, said Raven Jackson, another person who credits her home and stability to the program, but she’s proud of what the program helped her do.

“It got me on my feet,” Jackson said. “So I would definitely recommend anyone who might be eligible to apply.”

Details on the program and eligibility are listed on the Housing Authority’s website, <http://ww2.hacsb.com/residents/five-year-lease-assistance-program>

The goal, Razo said, is that five years on the program can lower poverty forever.

“As we help families transition off our programs, hopefully in a better place from when they started the term limited program,” she said, “we are helping change their mindset and breaking down the generational cycle of poverty.”

URL: <http://www.sbsun.com/social-affairs/20170325/how-do-you-end-poverty-housing-authority-of-san-bernardino-has-a-plan>

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