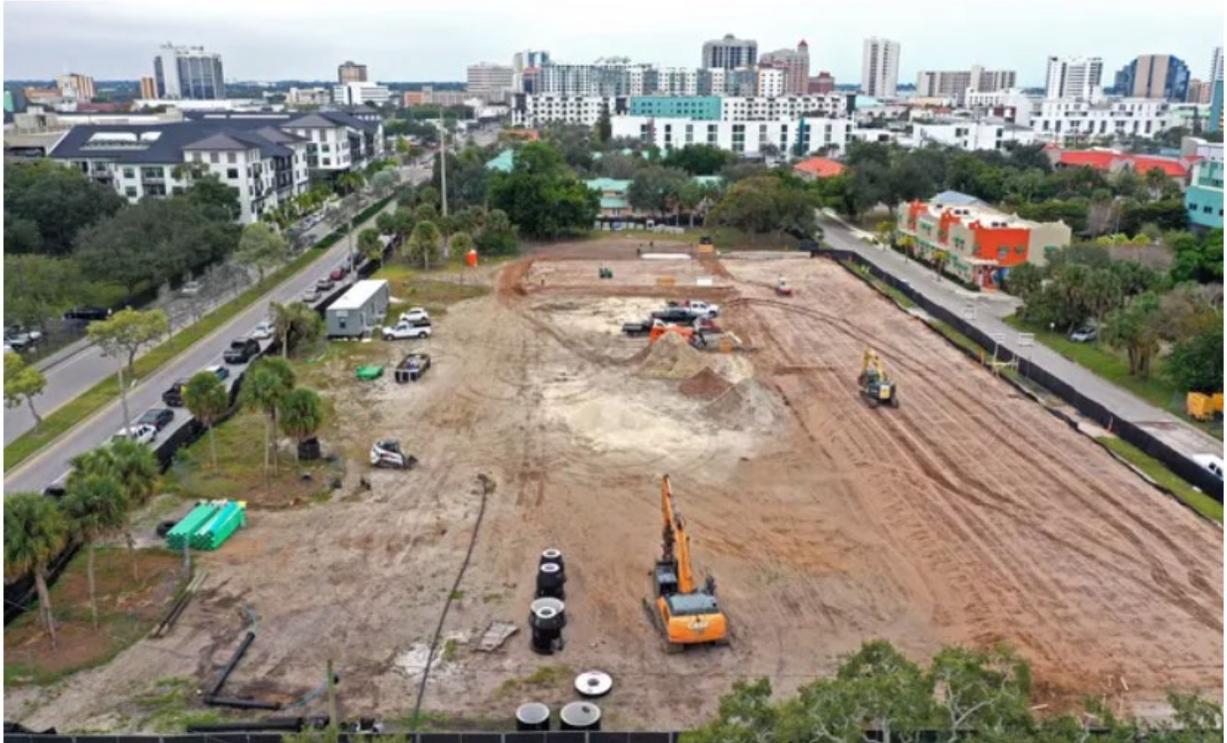


After years of waiting, affordable housing vouchers will be available in Manatee-Sarasota

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The construction site of Lofts on Lemon, an affordable housing development in downtown Sarasota. *THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE*

Applications for Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers in Manatee County will be accepted this year for the first time since 2015. But applying for a housing voucher and getting a spot on what is sure to be a lengthy waitlist is only the beginning of an oftentimes drawn-out process.

Willie Calhoun, executive director of the Manatee County Housing Authority, said when the applications last opened five years ago, about 6,000 to 7,000 people applied in a week's time. Only a quarter of them made the waitlist through a lottery selection.

It has taken since 2015 for the housing authority to go through that list, and it is now down the last few hundred names, Calhoun said.

He expects the application to reopen in the next six months. And he anticipates the number of people applying will be higher than years past due to the financial impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

Waiting three to five years to receive a voucher has been the norm, Calhoun said. This time, he said he expects it will be overwhelming.

Need exceeds supply

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's [Section 8 voucher program](#) assists very low-income families with affordable housing. The vouchers allow tenants to pay a subsidized portion of the rent while the local housing authority pays a portion, based on income levels and the number of people in a household.

According to HUD, a family's income may not exceed 50% of the median income for the county or metropolitan area and three-quarters of a public housing agency's vouchers must be applied to people whose incomes are less than 30% of the area median income.

In Manatee County, 30% of the area median income ranges from \$16,100 for a household of one to \$44,120 for a household of eight. Fifty percent area median income limits range from \$26,800 to \$50,500, according to Affordable Housing Online.

There are 109 housing authorities in Florida that offer the Section 8 voucher program. Across the state, people who secure a spot on these waitlists can expect to wait a little over one year to longer than seven years, according to Affordable Housing Online. As of Monday, only six waitlists were open in the state.

What's clear is the need for vouchers exceeds the supply of affordable units, Calhoun said. According to Affordable Housing Online, there are [33 low-income apartment](#) communities in Manatee County offering a total of 3,568 apartments.

Getting a voucher doesn't automatically guarantee someone a place. The applicant must then find housing and in a limited amount of time.

Calhoun said if 25 or 50 people received vouchers, he would be shocked if 5 or 10 people signed leases.

Voucher recipients initially have 60 days to find a place before the voucher expires. More often than not, Calhoun said they have to extend that to 150 days.

Rick DiGiorgio, Step Up Suncoast's housing counseling manager, said not having vouchers to assist people has made it difficult for those on fixed incomes. Relying on Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance as a primary income source makes paying rent challenging.

In Manatee County, over half the population is considered rent-burdened, meaning households pay more than 30% of their income in rent. That means any household making less than \$3,180 a month, according to Affordable Housing Online statistics, is considered overburdened with rent.

The vouchers pay Manatee County landlords \$800 toward rent each month on average while the average client pays \$400 toward their rent, according to Affordable Housing Online.

For those who struggle to pay rent or those who have waited years on waitlists, DiGiorgio said they often rely on assistance from nonprofit programs, like Season of Sharing or Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, known as LIHEAP.

Calhoun said there are several other barriers that those searching for housing could face after getting a voucher. Some landlords or properties require the tenant to have a monthly income that is three times the rent. Things like application fees, background checks and transportation issues can also sometimes be barriers.

“Once they get the voucher in their hand, it’s almost like having the ticket, but you can’t necessarily get on the bus or the plane because there are other criteria you have to go through,” Calhoun said.

Lesa Livingston, Manatee County Housing Authority director of housing choice vouchers, said some landlords choose not to accept the program, citing the program’s requirements as too strict.

“It’s really a challenge to say what units are out there because one moment we can have an apartment complex online and the next they can make a decision [that] they choose not to renew and they’re making people relocate,” Livingston said.



Aerial rendering of the \$20 million Sandpiper Place affordable rental housing complex in Bradenton. *COURTESY RENDERING*

Geri Lopez, the county’s director of Redevelopment and Economic Opportunity, said there are two affordable housing projects for renters and homeowners under construction, one [on State Road 70](#) with 96 units and another [on 26th Street West](#) with 92 units.

Related: [Here are the 6 affordable housing proposals for Tamiami Trail in Sarasota](#)

Working with developers to bring more complexes like these two are a priority for the county, Lopez said.

“The cost of housing has been rising faster than wages have,” Lopez said. “That’s been a real challenge for our residents, being able to find units in their price range. Now with the pandemic and with our unemployment being much higher, that is a huge challenge.”

Sarasota County waitlist to open in 2022

In Sarasota County, the application process for Section 8 housing will reopen in early 2022, said Sherri Campanale, vice president of Housing Operations at Sarasota Housing Authority.

When the process last opened in March of 2019, more than 6,000 people applied in 30 days before the process closed. Like in Manatee County, only a quarter secured a spot on the waitlist.

Campanale said about 1,300 people are actively waiting on the list as of last week. The Section 8 voucher program currently services 1,455 people in Sarasota County.

Because many low-income workers had had their hours cut or lost their jobs completely, the housing authority has had to pay higher portions of their clients' rent, shifting funding away from potential clients, Campanale said.

By Thursday, Campanale said the housing authority will issue vouchers to 30 to 35 families and will pull about 50 names off the waitlist to begin interviews and determine whether they qualify. The goal is to issue another 30 vouchers by the second week of March.

About 91% of the people issued a voucher who search for a place can find one in Sarasota County as the area for people to search extends from North Port to the Manatee River, Campanale said. Manatee and Sarasota housing authorities overlap a portion of the area and allow people with vouchers to go between a part of the two regions.

Yet as more vouchers are issued, Campanale said the search can be difficult for clients. Like in Manatee County, the housing authority often has to grant extensions for people to find a place.

"Now we'll have 60 of our people on the street looking for homes or apartments in an environment that's already difficult to find," she said. "You saturate the area with people with vouchers searching."

Affordable Housing Online says there are [16 low-income apartment communities](#) with a total of about 1,400 apartments for rent in Sarasota. On average, vouchers pay Sarasota County landlords \$900 each month toward rent and clients pay \$400.

Any household earning under \$3,110 a month is considered rent overburdened in Sarasota County. About half of the households who rent in the county are overburdened, according to Affordable Housing Online.

The housing authority is building one affordable housing complex, [Lofts on Lemon](#), that will be completed in mid-2022. Another complex called [Amaryllis Park Place](#) located on Orange Avenue will offer housing for low-income seniors, by late summer or early fall, Campanale said.

More: [Sarasota affordable housing complex 'Lofts on Lemon' breaks ground](#)

The county is in desperate need of Section 8 landlords, Campanale said. There are about 700 landlords that accept the program. She estimated they need about 600 more.

"You see all these new developments going up and unfortunately, little to none of them have anything set aside for a lower-income family to move into," Campanale said.