

Emergency housing vouchers are saving Sarasota families from homelessness



Stefania Lugli

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Sarasota County has used nearly all its vouchers earmarked for homeless families and vulnerable individuals.

Key Points

- Emergency housing vouchers provide federally-funded rental assistance to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness or anyone fleeing domestic violence.
- It's a 2021 initiative funded through the American Rescue Plan Act, with about 70,000 vouchers distributed to public housing agencies nationwide.
- According to data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 39 public housing agencies in Florida received vouchers.

Massiel Duran and her six kids spent two years without a stable place to call home.

They hopped from shelters to camps, to hotels, and even nights in their van – anything with walls to seek shelter behind.

Her husband died in 2019 of cancer, sweeping away half of Duran's support system and income. Soon after, she was forced to leave her three-bedroom house when the cost of rent engulfed her income.

Duran found a job at a country club but was eventually let go when COVID shut its doors in the spring of 2020. She survived off of unemployment and social security until she got the news every tenant dreads: Rent was going up on Jan. 1, 2021.

Duran and her children had to ring in the new year as a homeless family.

But now, the family rents a three-bedroom Bradenton apartment partially paid through an emergency housing voucher.

It is one of just 59 given to the Sarasota Housing Authority.



Massiel Duran with her children, from left, Nelson, 8, Ela, 12, Gia, 5, and Jeremiah, 4, at their home in Bradenton on Sunday. Duran is a recipient of Sarasota County's emergency housing voucher program. Dan Wagner/Herald-Tribune

What are emergency housing vouchers?

Emergency housing vouchers provide federally-funded rental assistance to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness or anyone fleeing domestic violence. It's a 2021 initiative funded through the American Rescue Plan Act, with about 70,000 vouchers distributed to public housing agencies nationwide.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 39 public housing agencies in Florida received vouchers.

Housing authorities varied widely in the number of vouchers granted, from 481 in Miami-Dade to 15 in the city of Marianna.

HUD allocated the Sarasota Housing Authority with 59 emergency housing vouchers in 2021, a number decided by a formula that takes factors such as homelessness and housing authority capacity into account.

To compare, Suncoast Partnership's 2022 count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless residents totaled over 1,000 people for both Sarasota and Manatee counties.

Currently, 49.15% of the EHVS are fully utilized, according to a federal dashboard last updated on June 28.

State numbers show a utilization rate of 44.41%, ranking Sarasota slightly above the state's average leasing rate.

Rick Toney, the vice president of development and finance at the Sarasota Housing Authority, said the housing program was designed for outside agency – such as a nonprofit or shelter – to identify vulnerable individuals or families.

“People can't come to us directly to get these vouchers,” Toney said. “They have to be referred to us.”

In Sarasota, two local agencies are responsible for such referrals: the Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness and Safe Place and Rape Crisis Center.

Duran was granted her voucher through Suncoast Partnership after meeting with her “angel” Wendy McNaughton, the assessment coordinator.

McNaughton said not only did Duran lose half her income – she lost half of everything, and that local rent prices were unattainable for a single mom with several children.

“When I took a look at her situation – mother of six children with her husband, a provider of these children, who had passed – I just thought to myself, ‘There's no way anything is gonna stabilize her without some kind of housing voucher,’” McNaughton said.

“How do you go to work with six children? Where do you get the day care? It was just so heavy,” she said.



Massiel Duran outside of her home in Bradenton on Sunday. Duran is a recipient of Sarasota County's emergency housing voucher program. Dan Wagner/Herald-Tribune

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Massiel Duran plays with her daughter, Gia, 5, outside of their home in Bradenton on Sunday. Duran is a recipient of Sarasota County's emergency housing voucher program. *Dan Wagner/Herald-Tribune*

Chris Johnson, the CEO of Suncoast, said specially designated EHV's provide more flexibility for continuum-of-care agencies like themselves.

"We could serve those that were falling through the cracks in other places that needed vouchers who may not qualify for other types," Johnson said, referring to cases like Duran's. "In that regard, it gave our community a nice boost of long-term support because these vouchers are indefinite. As long as the person retains their qualifications."

After being deemed a "perfect candidate" by Suncoast, Duran found herself sitting across from a caseworker at Suncoast's offices in September 2021.

She was told about the federal program and about how EHV's were designed for fragile cases like hers. She was stunned.

"I was like, 'oh, my god. This exists?' It was such a blessing," Duran said.

When the worker handed over the paperwork for her application and offered Duran the chance to take them home for her signatures, she scoffed.

"(The worker) was like, 'Do you want to come back and take these papers home?' I said, 'no, no, no, no. I'm sitting right here and filling it out.'"

Soon after, she and her kids had November move-in date for a three-bedroom apartment.



Massiel Duran plays with her children, from left, Nelson, 8, Jeremiah, 4, and Gia, 5, outside of their home in Bradenton in June. Duran is a recipient of Sarasota County's emergency housing voucher program. *Dan Wagner/Herald-Tribune*

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Challenge of a tight housing market

Sarasota County has allocated all its EHV's, but officials continue to struggle to find sustainable rent prices to actually utilize them.

Nonprofit organizations struggle with high rent just like the rest of the community they serve. The Sarasota Housing Authority is limited to a 120% FMR, or fair market rent, a number provided by HUD to determine payments for various housing assistance programs.

“Interest and availability isn’t necessarily the issue,” said Lauren Bowen, a project manager for Suncoast Partnership. “Right now, rents are just so, so high that the vouchers aren’t able to keep up.”

Bowen said other philanthropic agencies help in scouring for low rents, and when that remains a struggle, a team effort is made to close the gap between what a voucher can cover and what a landlord demands.

That challenge can explain Sarasota’s lag in total utilization, according to Johnson. As of June 28, HUD lists 16 vouchers as “actively issued,” meaning that there are 16 EHV’s granted to a person or family but not currently being leased.

Yani Rosado, the agency program manager for housing choice vouchers at the Sarasota Housing Authority, said that despite “everything going extremely well” with finding qualified applicants, several issuances aren’t leased due to families struggling to find acceptable and affordable homes.

“We’ve been encouraging landlords to accept vouchers by offering a \$750 bonus for any new landlords accepting the voucher and explaining to them that these tenants are long-term,” Rosado said in an interview with the Herald-Tribune.

Toney added that there is also a 60-day deadline for a grantee to find a lease. Families can request an extension if “they show they have been actively looking” for another 30 days, he said.



Massiel Duran walks with her children, from left, Nelson, 8, Jeremiah, 4, and Gia, 5, outside of their home in Bradenton in June. Duran is a recipient of Sarasota County’s emergency housing voucher program. Dan Wagner/Herald-Tribune

‘It’s a blessing’

Duran admitted that, in desperation, she listed that she only had three kids on a rental application for a two-bedroom apartment two years ago. She was approved, but the guilt of lying nagged at her.

“I’m such a believer that when I know I don’t do things the right way, something won’t work out. So I went to the guy and said before I give you this money, I want to let you know that I have six kids and would prefer going into the contract being honest.”

The landlord then rejected her contract.

“I cried so much,” Duran said. “I was in the car, at CVS, with my kids, not knowing where I was gonna sleep that night. I kept crying and thinking ‘my God, why did I say the truth?’ ... I felt so broken-hearted.”

That rocky past has faded. The kids now sleep in their own beds. She can slowly save money to buy a home.

Duran also hopes to hug McNaughton one day. The coordinator saved her from homelessness – but the two have yet to actually meet.

“I can’t ask for more. It’s a blessing. I am extremely grateful and forever will be.”