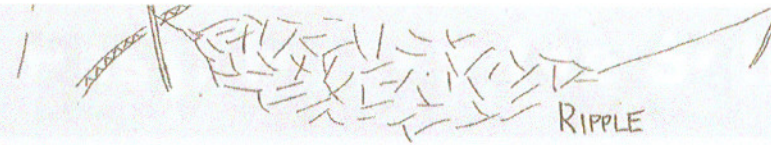


brother" bureaucracy established under welfare reform is benign.

The Welfare Reform Advisory Committee's report did recommend liberalizing the definition of work and ex-



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## Cutting Section 8 vouchers hurts people with disabilities

by Helen Rivard and Lisa Chabot

The scarcity of affordable housing is one of the most pressing issues facing residents in the Commonwealth today. In December 2004, some 50,000 households were waiting for a Section 8 vouchers from the state's Department of Housing and Community Development. And finding affordable housing is even more critical an issue for people with disabilities who are among the most impoverished in the country. On average, a person who qualifies for Social Security Income (SSI) receives less than \$800 a month—an amount that cannot sustain an apartment in most sections of Massachusetts.

In the past, many of these individuals with disabilities have received housing subsidies from the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). These subsidies came through either the Departments of Mental Health or Mental Retardation service contracts, but they did not include a provision to cover increases in housing costs due to inflation. At one time, the Commonwealth attempted to balance some of these costs by providing 707 certificates. The DMH and DMR "owned" the 707 vouchers as part of the service contract that stayed with the

program when individuals moved from the site.

As part of the state's FY '04 budget, the administration drastically reduced the DHCD budget for 707 subsidies and converted most certificates assigned to programs with fewer than eight (8) clients to Section 8 "mainstream" vouchers that would be reserved for people with disabilities. When these clients moved on to a more independent living situation, the program lost their subsidies and had to absorb the additional housing costs. That meant that a program with four (4) clients lost somewhere between \$16,000 to \$20,000 annually. Multiply this by the hundreds of programs within the state, and you can begin to see the ripple effects this plan has.

In an effort to keep contract funding level and also address providers' issues with the rising cost of living (such as rising health insurance, cost of living for groceries, gasoline and heating fuel, etc), there was a big push from 2000 to 2003 to have all individuals with disabilities apply for federal Section 8 "mainstream" housing vouchers. The availability of these vouchers not only helped to curb the tide of eroding service dollars, but these vouchers also

allowed people with disabilities to become more independent and self-sufficient.

During the past year, the federal government has established new rules on the use of Section 8 certificates and the setting of fair market rents (FMR). These changes dictated the rent the housing authorities could pay, and in some cases, affected how local housing authorities determine FMR and reduced the rent they could pay by as much as 50 percent. In addition, due to the threat of a \$1.6 billion cut to the whole Section 8 program, housing authorities had to find ways to reduce their expenditures under the Section 8 program.

Given the dire economic conditions of the people they serve, most housing authorities sought workable solutions instead of just cutting individuals and families from the Section 8 program. These solutions ranged from letting them make reduced rental payments to landlords to not paying one full month of rent for each Section 8 certificate. In addition, some housing authorities have eliminated rent increases for anyone with a Section 8 voucher, but this practice severely damaged the program's creditability with landlords

who often accept Sections 8 certificates as they know their rent is guaranteed.

Last and most powerfully, housing authorities no longer can make accommodations for persons with disabilities. Each year, a person using a Section 8 certificate must provide documentation to qualify for a Section 8 certificate, an overwhelming requirement for individuals with mental illness. Since housing authorities are under extreme pressure to reduce their Section 8 expenditures, they no longer have the flexibility to help providers secure the documentation, and thus they must stop paying on that voucher.

The net affect of these actions has damaged the effectiveness of the Section 8 program in securing and maintaining affordable, safe and decent housing for persons with disabilities. And unfortunately, because these changes did not happen all at once but were spread out over a couple of years, the true impact on the provision of services for people with disabilities will not be understood for some time.

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