

Living Well

A monthly special section of news & information for seniors

THE WAITING GAME

How seniors can get their names on the waitlist for affordable housing

By Chris Kenrick

Affordable housing is the top request that Palo Alto senior services agency Avenidas receives on its help line, says social worker Thomas Kingery.

Hundreds of federally subsidized apartments for seniors exist in Palo Alto, but clearing the waitlists can take months or years, and many waitlists are closed altogether, according to Kingery and others who work in the field.

There's an urgent demand and an acute shortage of supply, Kingery said.

Those who secure a subsidized apartment pay about one-third of their income for rent under federal guidelines. The balance is covered through an array of programs operated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

In a recent interview with the Palo Alto Weekly, Kingery outlined his advice to those ages 62 and over seeking government housing assistance.

"There's no easy, common-sense way to look for low-income housing," Kingery said.

Those seeking housing must repeatedly check multiple websites of government and nonprofit housing operators to keep tabs on which waitlists are open and then quickly apply to be added to the lists.

In Palo Alto, it can take up to 3 1/2 years to clear the waitlist for a studio at downtown's Lytton Gardens, said Donna Quick, an assistant housing administrator there. Right now, the wait is considerably shorter for spots in the complex's assisted living section, which comprises about 50 of the 289 units at Lytton Gardens, Quick said.

As of last week, waitlists were closed at the 120-unit Stevenson House on Charleston Avenue and the 57-unit Sheridan Apartments near California Avenue — both federally supported apartment complexes in Palo Alto that are dedicated to seniors. Stevenson House shuts down its list if the existing waitlist contains so many names that the average wait for a unit is a year or more, according to its published procedures.

But waitlists were open for some single-occupancy rooms in buildings in downtown Palo Alto and one apartment complex on San Antonio Road, as well as several senior housing developments in Mountain View.

Once on a list, applicants still can wait months or years for an apartment, depending on the



Residents at Sheridan Apartments participate in a dance class at the 57-unit apartment building. The waitlist for Sheridan Apartments is currently closed.

project, local housing administrators said.

Kingery said many who call him are residents who've lived here all their lives and, for one reason or another, need to find low-income housing, which isn't necessarily available to them.

Kingery said he received a call, for example, from a longtime resident who had been living with an elderly parent in the family home with a reverse mortgage. When the parent died, ownership of the home went to the bank and the adult child had to vacate.

"This is unfortunate because (Palo Alto) is where their friends are. This is where their doctors are. This is where their sense of home is," Kingery said. "It's hard for me to tell them that, if they want a roof over their head, they're going to have to leave — that's a detail they don't want to accept."

The Santa Clara County Housing Authority as well as the nonprofits Alta Housing, Lytton Gardens, MidPen Housing and Stevenson House, which operate low-income apartments in the area, are among the groups seniors should check with when

searching for housing.

Income qualifications for subsidized units vary, depending on how a project was financed, said Sheryl Klein, chief operating officer at Alta Housing, but tenants typically pay one-third of their monthly income for rent.

Income eligibility in many cases is calculated as a percentage of area median income. Under HUD's most recently published figures for Santa Clara County, an individual would have to have an income of \$58,000 or less (50% of the median income) to qualify for federal housing assistance. A couple would have to earn \$66,300 or less.

Beyond stand-alone senior complexes like Lytton Gardens and Stevenson House, thousands of low-income apartments scattered up and down the Peninsula — and beyond — are managed by Alta and MidPen.

Since there's no fee to join a waitlist, Klein encourages applicants to maximize their chances by getting on waitlists for as many properties as they're interested in.

"If people want to come into our office (in Palo Alto), we'll

help them fill out the paperwork," she said.

Among the 26 properties operated by Alta, waitlists were open last week at Alma Place and the Barker Hotel, both single-room occupancy buildings in downtown Palo Alto, as well as at the Hotel California on California Avenue and El Dorado Place Apartments on Alma Street at El Dorado Avenue in Palo Alto. Fair Oaks Commons in Redwood City and Eagle Park and Luna Vista apartment complexes in Mountain View also had open waitlists.

MidPen Housing, which operates

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The waitlist at Lytton Gardens in Palo Alto can take as long as 3 1/2 years to clear.

HOUSING WORKSHOP

Senior services agency Avenidas will offer an informational presentation for those looking for low-income housing in Santa Clara County on Wednesday, March 9, from 3 to 4:30 p.m. To register for the free session, email register@avenidas.org or call 650-289-5400. Proof of vaccination will be required at the door.

Waiting game

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low-income housing in 11 northern California counties, opens waitlists only when numbers are dwindling, so the likelihood that someone would get called in for a unit within a few months is good, said Tommy McDonald, vice president of corporate communications and public affairs.

“Those are done on a first-come, first-served basis,” he said.

But selection is typically by lottery when MidPen opens up a new complex.

“Once the application period is opened, we often get thousands of applicants,” McDonald explained. “It really just depends on the results of the lottery.”

Among the open waitlists at MidPen last week were Palo Alto Gardens, a mixed family and

senior affordable complex on San Antonio Road, as well as senior complexes Paulson Park I, Paulson Park II and The Fountains in Mountain View.

Beyond project-based subsidized units, the Santa Clara County Housing Authority administers federally subsidized Section 8 vouchers to individuals or families, for use on the private market. In that program, the housing agency pays the subsidy directly to the landlord on behalf of the participating household.

The county agency currently provides vouchers for 170 Palo Alto households that are headed by seniors, according to Housing Authority management analyst Orleashia Amey. An additional 119 households in Palo Alto that are not headed by seniors also hold vouchers, Amey said.

“Anyone interested in receiving a (HUD-subsidized) voucher

can sign up to our interest list, where applicants are randomly selected when vouchers become available,” she said. Countywide, the housing authority was administering vouchers for more than 19,000 households as of late 2021. Thousands more meet the income guidelines to qualify if more federal funds were to become available, according to the agency.

Until recently, Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County offered a house-sharing program, matching housing-seekers with homeowners desiring extra income, but that program was phased out at the end of 2021. Angela Laines, marketing and communications manager for the agency, does not know if the program will restart.

An additional resource for seniors seeking affordable housing is the Silicon Valley Independent Living Center, which offers guidance to older adults and people



Margali Gauthier

Stevenson House is among a handful of federally supported senior apartment complexes in Palo Alto.

with disabilities. The agency holds a monthly housing workshop on Zoom to help people with their search. The agency also provides information on housing outside of

the county, where it may be cheaper for seniors to live. ■

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