

# **SOMERSWORTH HOUSING AUTHORITY**

## **Handbook for Housing Choice Vouchers Recipients!**



**November 2014**



# Somersworth Housing Authority

Central Office: 25A Bartlett Ave, P.O. Box 31, Somersworth, N.H. 03878  
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## Welcome!

You have been accepted into the Somersworth Housing Authority Section 8 Program. Because you qualify for this program, a Voucher has been issued in your name. With this subsidy, a portion of your rent will be paid for by the Section 8 Voucher Program. To begin receiving assistance, you must find appropriate housing, the housing must meet housing quality standards and the owner must agree to take part in the program.

On the following pages you will find information that will assist you in understanding the program such as:

- How to find a suitable apartment
- How the program works
- Participant responsibilities

You have been assigned a Section 8 Housing Officer who can give you important help in getting rental assistance. If you have questions about the program or your housing, your Housing Officer can answer them.

***Keep in touch! We are here to help you!***

Sincerely,

Keri McIlvaine  
Section 8 HCV Specialist

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## Housing Choice Vouchers

There is only 1 (one) type of subsidy through the Section 8 Program: Vouchers. See page 7 for Housing Choice Voucher Worksheet to help you calculate whether a unit fit the rent limits on the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

In this program, the tenant's portion is based on income and any difference over the Payment Standard the owner is charging. We determine 30% of your monthly adjusted income. From that figure we subtract our utility allowance for any utilities that you have to pay. That figure is what you have to pay to the owner each month plus the overcharge the landlord is asking.

The Payment Standard is the maximum allowable gross rent the Housing Authority can pay up to on your behalf. Your subsidy is the difference between the Payment Standard and your 30% adjusted income.

The rent subsidy you are eligible for is based on your voucher size and income and the contract rent the owner is requesting. All have an impact on the portion of rent you will be responsible for.

## Finding Appropriate Housing

**Your Voucher is Valid for 120 Days!** During this time, you must either have your current housing approved or locate other housing. No extensions will be issued, unless you require a reasonable accommodation.

- If you wish to stay where you are, please notify your Section 8 Coordinator immediately. If the unit meets Housing Quality Standards (see page 9) and the owner will accept Section 8, it may be possible for you to receive assistance there.
- If your current housing does not meet the requirements, or if you want to move, it is **your responsibility to locate a suitable unit!** You must show that you are making reasonable efforts to find housing, and **YOU NEED TO LET YOUR HOUSING OFFICER KNOW HOW THE SEARCH IS PROGRESSING!**

***If you have not found housing within the allowable time frame, your voucher will be canceled and issued to the next person on the waiting list!***

## Tips for a Successful Housing Search

The following are places to look when searching for new housing:

- Newspapers
- Schools or Post Offices
- Community Bulletin Boards (there is one in the Central Office on Bartlett Ave)
- Landlord Referral List
- Friends, Family, and Neighbors
- Former Landlords
- Realtors
- Craigslist.com or other internet web sites

When you locate a unit, ask these questions:

- What is the street address?
- How much is the rent?
- How many bedrooms does it have?
- What utilities are included?
- What type of heating fuel is used?
- How is the hot water heated?
- What type of cooking fuel is used?
- Are the stove and refrigerator provided?
- Are there any special conditions (i.e. pets, home business?)

Make an appointment to view the unit:

- Be prompt! If you cannot keep the appointment, cancel with plenty of notice.
- Bring references.
- Make child care arrangements whenever possible
- Find out if the owner is familiar with the Section 8 Program, but please do not try to explain the program.
- If the owner has any questions, please give them the Somersworth Housing Authority number.
- **Make sure the unit meets your standards and bring the housing quality checklist (see page 10).**

# Voucher Worksheet

Each time you view a rental unit, you should ask yourself the following questions to determine the total housing costs for that apartment.

- A. What is the **payment standard rent limit** for my family?
- B. What is the **rent** for this apartment?
- C. Place a check mark opposite each utility you are required to pay:

**Heat:**            Natural Gas   
                      Propane Gas   
                      Oil   
                      Electricity

**Cooking:**       Natural Gas   
                      Propane Gas   
                      Oil   
                      Electricity

**Hot Water:**    Natural Gas   
                      Propane Gas   
                      Oil   
                      Electricity

**Lights, Refrigeration,  
or Other Electricity:**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- D. What is the estimated cost for each of the utilities? (see enclosed Utility Allowance chart)

<b>Utility:</b>	<b>Estimated Allowance:</b>
Heat	_____
Hot Water	_____
Cooking Fuel	_____
Other Electricity	_____
 Total Cost	 _____

- E. Add the **Rent** and **total Utility** cost to determine the Total Housing cost:

Rent: \_\_\_\_\_  
All Utilities: \_\_\_\_\_  
  
Total Housing Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

- F. Is the Total Housing Cost for this apartment **Less Than or Equal To** your housing limit?

Yes                       No

If the answer to F is YES, the apartment has met the total housing cost requirement of the Section 8 Program. If the apartment appears to meet the remaining requirements, call your Housing Officer, with the information. If the rent is close to the rent limit, call the Housing Officer, because he/she may be able to negotiate with the owner. Final determination will be made by your Housing Officer.

## **Security Deposits**

Owners **may collect a security deposit** which is no more than one month's rent. Owners may not collect more than they would collect from an unassisted tenant. If the owner request a security deposit to hold the unit, be sure the receipt notes that it is refundable if the unit is not approved by SHA.

When you move out, the owner, subject to State or Local law, **may use the security deposit**, including any interest, as reimbursement for any unpaid rent, damages to the unit, or for other amounts that you may owe under the lease.

The owner must give you a **written** list of all items charged against the deposit, and the amount of each item. After deducting that amount, the owner must refund the full amount of the unused balance to you. If the security deposit is not sufficient to cover amounts you may owe, under the lease, the owner may seek to collect the balance from you.

## **Lead Based Paint**

**Know the rules and watch for it!**

Buildings that were constructed prior to 1978 may have lead paint. Lead is potentially dangerous and damaging, especially to young children. Federal regulation requires that **owners inform families and SHA** if they have knowledge of the presence of lead-based paint in a rental unit.

If your child has tested positive for EBL, call your Housing Officers immediately!

If you suspect your child has been exposed to lead based paint, please call your doctor or 1-800-852-3345 (NH Lead Paint Center).

**For more information on lead based paint, please read your brochure:  
"Protect your family from Lead in your Home."**



# Housing Quality Standards

When you find a unit, be sure it fits your standards as well as those of SHA. To ensure this use the Housing Quality Standards Checklist.

## Housing Quality Standard Checklist

The unit you choose must be "safe, sanitary, and decent." Use this checklist to help determine if the unit will pass basic inspection guidelines. Check off problem items as you go through the unit on your first visit. Later, a housing agency representative will inspect the unit.

### THE BUILDING EXTERIOR

- Yes  No  Are foundation, stair rails, and porches sound and free from hazard and deterioration?
- Yes  No  Is there a handrail for four or more steps?
- Yes  No  Are chimney and other brickwork free of loose bricks and mortar?
- Yes  No  If you have a child under age 6, is the paint chipping, peeling, or cracking?

### LIVING ROOM

- Yes  No  Are there two working electrical outlets or one outlet and one light fixture?
- Yes  No  Can first floor window be locked?
- Yes  No  Is there at least one window and is the window(s) and the frame in good condition?
- Yes  No  Are walls, ceiling and floors in good condition?
- Yes  No  If you have a child under age 6, is the paint peeling, chipping or cracking?

## **KITCHEN**

- Yes  No  If appliances are provided, are they working properly?
- Yes  No  Is the plumbing free from leaks and working properly?
- Yes  No  Is there one working outlet and 1 working, permanently installed light fixture?
- Yes  No  Can all first floor windows be locked and are they in good condition?
- Yes  No  If you have a child under the age of 6, is the paint peeling, chipping or cracking?
- Yes  No  Is there adequate space for storage and food preparation?

## **BATHROOM**

- Yes  No  Are the tub, sink, shower, and toilet in good condition and working properly?
- Yes  No  Is there an air vent or an operable window with a lock?
- Yes  No  Are floors, ceiling and walls in good condition?
- Yes  No  Is there at least one light fixture?

## **BEDROOMS**

- Yes  No  Is there a window in good condition in each bedroom?
- Yes  No  If the bedroom is on the first floor, does the window lock?
- Yes  No  Are there two working electrical outlets or one outlet and one light fixture per bedroom?
- Yes  No  If you have a child under age 6, is the paint peeling, chipping, or cracking?

## **OTHER ROOMS AND AREAS**

Yes  No  Do the furnace and water heater work and are they in good condition?

Yes  No  Does the hot water have a pressure relief valve and Discharge line 6 to 8 inches from the floor?

Yes  No  Does the unit have at least 2 exits?  
(NOTE: Any window can be an acceptable exit on the first or second floor).

Yes  No  Do all rooms have a means of illumination and are they free from electrical hazards?

Yes  No  Are the house and yard free from trash and other debris?

Yes  No  Does the furnace provide adequate heat for all rooms?

## **Leasing Up!**

When you find a place that you feel meets your standards and program standards, do the following:

- **Step One:**  
Once the owner has agreed to rent to you, ask the owner to complete the Request for Tenancy Approval, located in your briefing packet.
- **Step Two:**  
Send the Request for Tenancy Approval to your Housing Officer. Contact the Housing Officer by phone.
- **Step Three:**  
The Housing Officer will discuss the program with the owner, if he/she should have any questions and explain the program.
- **Step Four:**  
An inspection of the unit will be scheduled.

➤ **Step Five:**

When requested, SHA will provide prospective owners the addresses of your current and prior landlords.

➤ **Step Six:**

If the unit meets the requirements of the program, and the owner agrees to participate in the program, a **contract will be prepared** for signatures. Your new landlord will approach you to sign his/her own form of lease. Review as you normally would any official document before signing.

## **Preparing to move! THE KEY IS TO PLAN AHEAD!**

- SHA will not help with your moving costs. This is your **responsibility!**
- Give your current landlord **proper notice**.
- Make arrangements for **utilities to be transferred** to your new address. There is sometimes a deposit required or additional services fees. Plan Ahead!
- Fill out and mail a **change of address card** at the Post Office.
- Register your children in the **new school** if necessary.
- **Leave in good standing!** This is very important...you want to have good references to give to a new landlord.

## **I Think I've Been Discriminated Against, What Can I Do?**

**Discrimination is against the law.** No owner can refuse to rent to anyone solely because of race, creed, age, sex, color, national origin, marital status or a person's physical or mental handicap.

Discrimination may include:

- Setting different terms or conditions for different people.
- Advertising in a discriminatory way. For example: Men Only.
- Denying a place is available when it actually is.

### **If you have been discriminated against:**

- Complete the **HOUSING DISCRIMINATION COMPLAINT FORM** (available in your briefing package.)

➤ You may also contact:

New Hampshire Commission for Human Rights  
163 Loudon Rd.  
Concord, NH 03301  
(603)271-2767

## **Family Responsibilities**

**The family must follow the rules of the Section 8 Program in order to continue participating in the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program. The family may be terminated from the program if the family violates any family obligation or commits any fraud in connection with any Federal housing program.**

### **The Family Must:**

- Provide truthful, accurate, and complete records, information, or documentation determined to be necessary, including the following: submission of Social Security numbers, citizenship information or eligible immigration status, and submissions required for annual or interim reexamination of household and composition as requested including signed consent forms for obtaining information.
- Supply any information requested by SHA to verify that the family is living in the unit or information related to family absence from the unit. The family must promptly notify SHA in writing when the family is away from the unit for an extended period of time.
- Permit inspection of the dwelling unit at reasonable times after reasonable notice. Failure to permit inspections after two attempts will result in removal from the program.
- Give at least thirty (30) days written notice to SHA and the owner of the family's intent to move or terminate the lease.
- Use the assisted unit for residence by the family only! Only the household members on the subsidy are to live in the unit, allowing unauthorized person to live in the unit is a program violation.
- **Report any and all changes in family income and allowance within ten days of the occurrence.** The amount of the family's required total tenant payment is subject to change by reason of changes to program rules and changes to family income, composition, and extent of exceptional medical or other unusual expenses.

## **More Responsibilities**

**Members of the household may engage in legal profit making activities in the unit, but only if such activities are incidental to primary use of the unit for residence by members of the family. Legal profit making activities must meet all city or town regulation, and have landlord approval.**

- Notify SHA of any changes in family composition as soon as the change occurs. SHA must be informed of the birth, adoption or court awarded custody of a child.
- Request written approval from the landlord to add any other person as an occupant of the unit.
- Agree that any persons who move in without permission of the SHA may be required to leave the unit if it is determined that the unit has been overcrowded.
- Notify SHA in writing if any family member no longer lives in the unit. Provide proof of current residence as instructed by your Housing Officer.
- The family must cooperate with SHA in finding another unit when the family is no longer eligible for the unit it now occupies because of a change in family size.

## **Other Obligations**

### **The Family Must Not:**

- Sublease or assign lease or transfer the unit.
- Provide accommodations for boarders or lodgers.
- Own or have any interest in the dwelling unit.
- Commit fraud bribery, or any other corrupt or criminal act in connection with any Federal Housing Program.
- Engage in any drug-related activity or violent criminal activity.
- Receive housing assistance under the Section 8 Program while receiving another housing subsidy for the same unit or a different unit under any other Federal, State or local housing assistance program.

- Commit any serious or repeated violation of the lease.

## **Guest Policy**

The family is permitted visitors to their dwelling unit for up to **14 calendar days per year**.

***Violation of this policy may result in termination of participation in the Section 8 Program.***

## **Absence From Unit Policy**

The family must not be absent from the unit more than a maximum of 90 days per year.

***Housing assistance payments terminate if the absence is longer than the maximum time permitted.***

## **Adding New Household Members**

Before someone moves into your home, follow these steps:

1. Contact your Housing Officer.
2. Contact the owner of the unit for written approval.
3. Provide a written statement to your Housing Officer at SHA.
4. Provide evidence of citizenship or eligible immigration status, Social Security documentation, income and expense information, and a police check (if an adult). SHA will provide you with the appropriate forms.
5. If the new member is an adult, they must sign the statement of Family Responsibility and the lease. By doing this, they are agreeing to follow all program rules and regulations.

# **SUBSIDY STANDARDS**

Standards used to Issue  
Vouchers

Standards used to Determine  
Acceptability of Unit Size

<b>Voucher Size</b>	<b>Minimum Number of Person in Household</b>	<b>Maximum Number of persons in Household</b>
0-Bedroom	1	1
1-Bedroom	1	3
2-Bedroom	2	5
3-Bedroom	3	7
4-Bedroom	5	9

As a general policy no more than two persons shall be required to share a bedroom. SHA will take into consideration mitigating circumstances in cases where applicants or program participants have a verifiable need for a different size unit that this is outlined under the Subsidy Standards.

## **Family Violations of Housing Quality Standards**

**The family is responsible for violations of Housing Quality Standards (HQS) caused by any of the following:**

- Failure to pay for utilities that the owner is not required to pay for utilities which are to be paid by the tenant.
- Failure to provide and maintain any appliances that are not provided by the owner but are to be provided by the tenant.
- Damages to the dwelling unit or premises (beyond normal wear and tear) caused by any member of the household or guest.
- Any life threatening HQS violation caused by the family must be corrected by the family within no more than 24 hours. Any other family caused defects, must be corrected by the family within no more than 30 calendar days (or any SHA approved extension).



## **Termination of Assistance**

Program assistance may be terminated at any time for any of the following reasons:

- If the family violates any of part 4 of the Family Obligations under the Section 8 Voucher Program.
- If any member of the family has ever been evicted from public housing or other Federally subsidized program.
- If a Housing Authority (HA) has ever terminated assistance under the voucher program for any member of the family.
- If any member of the family commits fraud, bribery or any other corrupt criminal act in connection with any federal housing program.
- If the family currently owes rent or other amounts to the Housing Authority or to another Housing Authority in connection with Section 8 or public housing assistance under the 1937 act.
- If the family has not reimbursed any Housing Authority for amounts paid to an owner under a HAP contract for rent, damages to the unit, or other amounts owed by the family under the lease.
- If the family breaches an agreement with the Housing Authority to pay amounts owed to a Housing Authority, or amounts paid to an owner by a Housing Authority.
- If a family has engaged in or threatened abusive or violent behavior toward Housing Authority personnel.
- If any member of the family fails to sign and submit consent forms for obtaining information in accordance with the regulation of the program.
- If the family does not submit required evidence of citizenship or eligible immigration status.
- At any time, SHA may deny assistance to an applicant, or terminate assistance to a participant family if any member of the family commits:
  - a. Drug-related Criminal Activity
  - b. Violent Criminal Activity
- If the family fails to make timely family portion payments to the owner or fails to fulfill its obligation under the lease with the owner.

## **Informal Hearing Procedure**

**An opportunity for an informal hearing is available to you to consider whether the following SHA decisions relating to the individual circumstance of a participant family are in accordance with the law, HUD regulations and SHA policies:**

- A determination of the family's annual or adjusted income, and the use of such income to compute the housing assistance payment.
- 
- A determination of the appropriate utility allowance (if any) for tenant paid utilities from the SHA utility allowance schedule.
- A determination of the family unit size under the SHA subsidy standards.
- A determination that a voucher program family is residing in a unit with a larger number bedrooms than appropriate for the family unit size under the SHA subsidy standards, or the SHA determination to deny the family's request from the standards.
- A determination to terminate assistance for a participant family because of the family's action or failure to act.
- A determination to terminate assistance because the participant family has been absent from the assisted unit for longer than the maximum period under the SHA policy and HUD rules.

A participant family has the right to a pre-hearing discovery of SHA documents, including records and regulations that are directly related to the hearing. SHA has a parallel right to a pre-hearing examination of relevant family documents. A supervised inspection of all documents will take place in the SHA office. Either party must produce documents that are directly related to the hearing. Failure by either part to produce such a document prevents the party from raising any issue, fact or claim concerning the document at the hearing.

If you request an informal hearing, the hearing will be conducted by an employee of the Authority, or other public official. The person conducting the hearing will not be directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the Authority's Housing Choice Voucher Program. You have the right to retain counsel or other representation, if desired, at your own expense.

After the hearing the Authority will notify you, in writing, of the decision of the hearing official and the grounds for the decision.

If you would like to request a Formal Hearing before the Authority, please put your request in writing to the attention of your Housing Officer within ten (10) days of our notification to you regarding the informal hearing procedures.

## **Be Nice To Your Housing Officer**

SHA may deny or terminate assistance if the family has engaged in or threatened abuse or violent behavior toward housing authority personnel.

## **Annual Recertification** **We Will Notify You When it is Time to do This**

SHA will reexamine and re-determine the family income and composition annually by sending out verification forms for your signature three months before the anniversary date of the lease. At this time, the family must supply any information requested by the Housing Authority for use in the recertification. In addition, the Housing Authority will re-inspect the unit. The family must allow the housing authority to inspect at a reasonable time with reasonable notice. The Housing Officer will arrange for up to two separate opportunities for the unit inspection, however if the second attempt is unsuccessful, the Housing Officer will be forced to terminate rental assistance.

## **What if My Income Changes?**

Any changes in your income **must be reported in writing** to your Housing Officer within (10). The Housing Officer will send out (or they can be picked up in the central office) the necessary verification forms to verify the change. The change may have an effect on your portion of the rent. Depending on the change your rent may be increased or decreased.

Both you and the owner will be given written notification of any increase or decrease in your rent portion. This letter will show the effective date of the change and will be sent by SHA.

**If you begin paying the full amount of rent and no Housing Assistance Payments are being made on your behalf for one hundred and eighty days (180), you will no longer be eligible to be a participant in the Rental Assistance Program.**

## **What if I Want to Move?**

You may be able to move without losing your subsidy, but...

### **YOU MUST DO IT CORRECTLY!**

Call your Housing Officer if you are thinking about moving. Remember, unless your landlord fails to live up to the lease and contract

### **YOU CANNOT MOVE FOR THE FIRST YEAR OF YOUR LEASE**

If you have a complaint about your housing unit, notify your landlord **IN WRITING** and keep a copy for your files. Make sure you let your Housing Officer know...but if you need legal advice, contact your lawyer or NH Legal Assistance.

## **The ABC's of Portability**

The ability of a family to move from the jurisdiction of SHA to another Housing Authority is called **PORTABILITY**. Portability allows you to move anywhere in the United States with your voucher.

- If you want to leave the SHA service area, you need to:
  - Call your Housing Officer to find out if you can be issued a housing voucher assistance transfer
  - Let your Housing Officer know where you want to move. Your Housing Officer will advise you how to contact the Housing Authority where you want to move to request assistance.
  - Submit a Request for Tenancy Approval to the Housing Authority that covers the town you are moving to. This must be done within established time frame.
- If you are going on the program for the first time you **MUST** be very low income-eligible in the area where you lease up. SHA will make a determination regarding your eligibility and notify you.
- If you are a participant and transfer between the certificate and voucher programs, you **MUST** be low income-eligible for the new program in the area where you want to lease up.

- When you leave the jurisdiction of the SHA you must comply with the other housing authority's procedures. At any time, either the SHA or the other housing authority may make a determination to deny or terminate assistance to the family in accordance with the Federal Register.

**TO USE YOUR PORTABILITY OPTION: Contact your Housing Officer!**

## **The Household is Separating: Who Gets to Keep the Assistance?**

If the household divides, the assistance goes with one of the parties involved. If children are in the household, the voucher will remain with the individual who retains custody of the children. If there are no children involved, the elderly or disabled family member will retain the subsidy. For households who have no children, elderly or disabled family members, the subsidy will stay with that family member who remains in the original assisted unit. SHA will abide by any court determination of which family members continue to receive assistance in the program.

## **I've Received an Eviction, What Do I Do?**

To evict a subsidized tenant, an owner must follow requirements of New Hampshire State law. Here are some of the reasons why the owner can evict you:

- You fail to pay your portion of the rent.
- You continue any disorderly conduct after receiving a notice to stop
- You cause damage on purpose, or through gross negligence
- You continue to break fair lease agreements
- You allow unsanitary conditions to exist in and around your place
- You engage in criminal activities involving drugs

If you receive an eviction notice (a "Notice to Quit") contact your Housing Officer immediately and mail a copy of the notice to SHA. If you think you should not be evicted, you should call a lawyer at New Hampshire Legal Assistance or the law firm of your choice as soon as you have the notice. We **will not** go to court for you to fight the

eviction, but we will refer you to Legal Assistance and give you information on other housing if you ask.

**NEW HAMPSHIRE LEGAL ASSISTANCE:  
(603) 431-7411**

## **A Final Word**

This booklet has outlined for you the basic aspects and responsibilities of being a participant in the Section 8 Housing Voucher Program. If you have any questions after reading this booklet, please call our Housing Officer.

Enclosed in the tenant briefing packet you will find many resources. There are brochures on lead paint and finding a good place to live. **READ THEM . They will be helpful!**

**KEEP THIS HANDBOOK IN A SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE PLACE!**

You may want to refer to it often to answer questions that come up.

Congratulations on being accepted into the program. We sincerely hope that it is of great benefit to you!