

NINA MOINI: Minneapolis households that are struggling to afford rent may have a new option. Today through Thursday, the city's public housing agency is taking applications for housing vouchers for the first time since 2019. It's part of a new statewide program by the legislature that was created in 2023, with funding from the state government, as well as a sales tax in the Twin Cities Metro. Joining me now with more information is Minneapolis Public Housing Authority's Executive Director, Abdi Warsame. Thanks so much for being with us, Abdi.

ABDI Thank you for having me.

WARSAME:

NINA MOINI: People may be familiar with Section 8, a federal housing voucher program where tenants pay 30% of their income in rent, and then the government covers the rest. Can you tell us a little bit about how this new program in Minnesota is similar or different?

ABDI I mean, it's very similar. The new program, the state vouchers, is modeled on the Section 8 federal program. And
WARSAME: at a time when our city and our region is facing an affordable housing crisis, this new program will ease the burden for hundreds of low-income households. So this will be transformative. And it aims to pay 70% of the rent, while the households cover 30%.

There's a little bit of a difference, one that you have to live in Minnesota to apply for this new program, and you have to live in the city of Minneapolis to use our vouchers. So there's a little bit of different sorts of mobility, but it basically is mimicking and modeling on the success of the federal program.

NINA MOINI: Let's talk about the need. Across the country, people often wait a few years for vouchers. How has it been here in Minneapolis? I mentioned at the top there, it's taking applications for the first time since 2019.

ABDI It is a huge need, especially for the Section 8 voucher program. The last time we opened our Section 8 voucher
WARSAME: program was 2019, and we still have about 500 households on that program. And what we did at MPHA is we actually offered those 500 households the new state vouchers. They had the first right of refusal. And now we're opening it up to the public. We're very excited about it. And really want to thank the state leaders involved in establishing the Bring It Home program because it is a worthwhile program, and it is a step in the right direction.

NINA MOINI: Once someone does get on a waitlist, what needs to happen for them to receive that voucher and get into housing in Minneapolis? Do you have a sense for the time frame there, because you wonder where people are living in the meantime?

ABDI I mean, we go through the waitlist. The demand is much more than the actual. For example, right now, we
WARSAME: estimate that we're going to have about 1,500 new households on the state voucher program. And we can only serve about 600 to 800 households. So the need is always greater than what's available to households. But the only thing we can do is we work with families. We try to update that waiting list over time. And when there's opportunities open up, we give those vouchers to those families.

NINA MOINI: We've heard that it can be difficult to find landlords who will accept vouchers. Minneapolis does have an ordinance blocking property owners from rejecting tenants based on public assistance. But where can people use these vouchers? Are there limitations?

ABDI WARSAME: I mean, there is a lack of production. So we don't have a lot of deeply affordable units across our city. So we need more. And that's a challenge. So this program will have both tenants-based. So you can go and find a landlord, but we also try to do project-based voucher program as well, so where the voucher will live with the unit and not with the resident. But the challenge is there. The challenge is the production of units, making sure that we continue as a city and as a region to add more units, more deeply affordable units, so more families can be housed.

NINA MOINI: What do you tell folks about the general situation, about housing right now within the city of Minneapolis? We know there have been issues with homelessness, like there have been in many large cities. You mentioned a lack of really deeply affordable housing. We know that in the last year, some people had to stop working during the height of Operation Metro Surge. Some people's incomes were impacted that way. What's your overall sense through your work with the public housing authority?

ABDI WARSAME: I mean, we are facing a crisis. I'm not going to sugarcoat it. There is a affordable housing crisis in our city. There's a homelessness crisis in our city and in our region and in our country. And affordability is the biggest issue right now across the country. It is hard for families to afford their groceries, and it's hard for them to pay their rent.

And what we're dealing with is the most vulnerable members of our society-- folks that are at or below 30% area median income. And this project, this Bring It Home project, actually addresses that. It prioritizes families with small children, families that are struggling, that want to find their feet and want to have a roof over their heads.

But yeah, just like you said, it is a crisis. It is a challenge, and we need more support. And I'm thankful to the state legislators and the state leaders for bringing this, because this is the first time our state is actually issuing state vouchers, which is not unique. Other states have done that before. There are cities that have their own vouchers. So we are very much thankful. Like I said before, it's a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done.

NINA MOINI: You were talking a little bit about prioritizing families and folks with small children. Can you talk a little bit more about how you decide who does get a voucher?

ABDI WARSAME: I mean, this is decided by the legislature. So the program is designed for households with children under the age of 18. It is designed for households that are at 30% or below area median income. So very vulnerable families with children are the target group for this program.

NINA MOINI: And you mentioned today through Thursday you're accepting applications from the public. And I don't know if you mentioned, but would you mention how many applications you've received just so far?

ABDI WARSAME: Yeah, we've received 549 since noon. And we have a lot of folks in our office just applying and very excited that we have this opportunity today.

NINA MOINI: Noon today?

ABDI WARSAME: And it's open until-- yeah, until noon, 549 until 12:00 PM today. And they opened at midnight. And it will close at 11:59 PM on Thursday.

NINA MOINI: Got it, got it. So this grant that you receive from the state, I understand, is for \$21 million over two years. How confident are you that you'll continue to receive funding for the program in the future? Sometimes you'll get a big chunk of something, funds for something, a program. But there's no guarantee that that lasts for time to come.

ABDI WARSAME: There is no guarantee for anything, really. But we are assured that this program will be funded in perpetuity. And I do believe just the success that we've had with the Section 8 program, that has never been unfunded. You always had a bipartisan support. Both landlords benefit from it and residents. So I think, hopefully, fingers crossed that this will continue, and we will build on the success of the Bring It Home voucher program.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Abdi, I want to make sure that folks listening know where they can go for help to access this program or other programs.

ABDI WARSAME: I mean, they can come on our website. They can come at our headquarters, 1001 Washington North Avenue in Minneapolis. And this program is also available statewide. So it's available at St. Paul and other jurisdictions because it is a statewide program. And like I said, the aim is to help hundreds of families in Minneapolis and thousands in the future and thousands across our state. So it is exciting. And we will notify those successful applicants by November 1.

NINA MOINI: Abdi Warsame, thank you very much for your time.

ABDI WARSAME: Thank you very much.

NINA MOINI: Abdi Warsame is executive director of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.