

HUD plan raises rents on poor in public housing

By Bill Cummings



Photo: Pablo Martinez Monsivais / Associated Press

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In this March 20, 2018, file photo, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson takes his seat before testifying before a House Committee on Appropriation subcommittee hearing on Capitol Hill in ... more

A plan by the Trump administration to triple rents for the nation's poorest families is running into a wall of opposition from fair housing advocates and members of Connecticut's Congressional delegation.

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson last week proposed raising rents and adding work requirements for the millions of low income

residents living at public housing authorities or receiving Section 8 rental vouchers.

The HUD proposal represents one of the most far reaching overhauls of federal public housing assistance in decades and will impact thousands for residents in large cities such as Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford, as well as smaller communities such as Norwalk, Stamford, Danbury and Middletown.

The Bridgeport Housing Authority, for example, annually helps 12,000 people find affordable housing and manages nearly 2,600 public housing units and 2,800 Section 8 vouchers.

Carson said the bill seeks to “reform decades-old rent policies that are confusing, costly and counterproductive, in that the incentives they create often fail to adequately support individuals and families receiving HUD rental assistance in increasing their earnings.”

But the reforms are drawing fierce opposition from Democrats and local housing advocates who say the bill is a thinly veiled attempt to reduce federal subsidies for low income families and plunge millions into deeper poverty and homelessness.

“The ink is barely dry on President Trump’s \$1.5 trillion tax cut for the wealthiest individuals and largest corporations, and now his administration is proposing to triple rent for low-income families,” said Gov. Dannel P. Malloy.



WHAT IT COSTS TO RENT IN SOUTHWESTERN CONNECTICUT

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“This is yet another example of remarkably out-of-whack priorities from the Trump administration,” Malloy said. “Secretary Carson should rescind this outrageous and harmful proposal.”

The bill — dubbed the “Making Affordable Housing Work Act” — seeks to amend the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 and other laws to “encourage families to achieve self-sufficiency and for administrative efficiency.”

Housing advocates say the bill raises the base rent calculation for those living in public housing authorities or receiving federal rental assistance from 30 percent of gross income to 35 percent.

For the poorest families, the base rent of \$50 a month would rise to \$150 a month — triple what they pay now.

The changes would impact about half of the 4.7 million families nationally who receive federal housing assistance and about 77,000 families in Connecticut.

U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn, called the proposal “draconian” and said it will hurt millions of low income families.

Most vulnerable

The bill also seeks to place more work requirements on low income recipients living in communities where entry level jobs are in short supply. Other Republican bills would add work requirements on food stamps and Medicaid recipients.

“Those who live in public housing are the most economically vulnerable among us — they do so because they simply can’t afford higher rents,” said New Haven Mayor Toni Harp.

“This recent HUD proposal again betrays the extent to which the current administration is blind and deaf to the needs of the needy,” Harp said.

The HUD secretary told Washington reporters last week that current spending on housing is “unsustainable” and rental assistance is not reaching all who qualify, noting many remain on waiting lists for years.

“Every year, it takes more money, millions of dollars more, to serve the same number of households,” Carson said last week. “It’s clear from a budget perspective and a human point of view that the current system is unsustainable.”

Evonne Klein, commissioner of the state Department of Housing, said those receiving rental assistance are the working poor.

“By tripling their rent, it will not put those families on the road to self-sufficiency,” Klein said. “Rather, it will put them on the road to homelessness.”

Current policies working

Erin Boggs, executive director of the Open Communities Alliance, said Carson “misunderstands” his own agency’s programs.

“One of the key purposes is to help households who can’t otherwise manage on their own to find and keep stable housing,” Boggs said. “Cutting off these families will result in drastic increases in homelessness and increase the number of children in the foster care system.”

Boggs said Carson claims that current programs are not working when in fact they are assisting hundreds of thousands of families every day.

She said a recent survey of the Hartford Section 8 voucher program found that 73 percent of the families receiving assistance were elderly, disabled or working, and the remainder had preschool-aged children.

Jeffery Ingraham, vice chairman of the Norwalk Housing Authority, said the HUD proposal is not welcome news.

“I think it would present a tremendous burden to a lot of families,” Ingraham said, noting some Section 8 residents pay no rent.

Boggs said there is “interplay” between housing and employment. “If the minimum wage is insufficient to cover rents, families will need housing assistance even if they include a full-time worker,” she said.

Call to action

U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-4, said Carson’s proposals will only worsen the cycle of poverty and dependence on government assistance.

“Having worked on affordable housing issues for many years, I know that the most effective way to help struggling families is through community engagement, ensuring fair costs and education,” Himes said.

“Most households that qualify for federal housing assistance are already below the poverty line,” Himes said. “Burdening them with higher rents and other costs will only worsen their hardship and force more families into financial crises.”

Blumenthal said he’s gearing up for a fight against Carson’s reforms.

“Unfortunately, this kind of draconian, discriminatory punishment — while shocking in its cruelty — is no surprise coming from an administration that has repeatedly proven to value Mar-a-Lago members over working families,” Blumenthal said.

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