



LWVM Affordable Housing Study: Part 5 The Role of Local Housing Authorities in Massachusetts

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Previous articles in this series covered the need for affordable housing, zoning laws, and Chapter 40B, 40R and 40S. This article explains the work of local housing authorities and rental voucher programs.*

Chapter 121B of 1969 codified previous Massachusetts housing laws and enabled all cities and towns to create and operate a local housing authority (LHA). Currently there are 253 LHAs in Massachusetts, with significant differences among them based on local factors as well as the number of housing units in the community built or supported by government. Although operating in local communities, LHAs are technically part of state government.

Housing authorities in Massachusetts have five board members. In towns, four members are elected and one is appointed by the governor. In cities, the mayor and city council appoint four members (one representing labor, one representing tenants, and two appointed by the mayor) and the governor appoints the fifth member.

Housing Authorities' Powers & Responsibilities

The principal power of LHAs is to administer public housing and voucher programs that serve low-income residents. They do this under regulations of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) which establishes income guidelines for occupants and fair market rents based on median incomes for each area of the country. HUD also sets the contribution toward rent of occupants (usually about 30% of household income).

Massachusetts LHAs currently operate more than 227,000 state and federal housing units. This includes 50,000 federal and 34,000 state units of public housing. They are also responsible for the majority of federal and state vouchers and other types of housing. LHAs are responsible for accounting and reporting their activity to the state Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), which regulates all state programs and administers many of the federal programs.

In addition to ongoing activities such as maintaining properties, screening applicants and collecting rents, the LHAs have other important powers. They may receive loans, grants and annual contributions from

state or federal sources; purchase, lease or hold lands; contract for construction; borrow money; invest in securities; and engage in certain tax agreements. They are charged with working with local officials to study housing needs and living conditions in the community, and respond to the findings by providing housing for low-income families, and elderly and disabled people. With no independent source of funds, most LHAs have recently been strapped to maintain the publicly-controlled units they have and must depend on other mechanisms and community groups to initiate new developments.

Rental Voucher Programs: Section 8 and MRVP

Tenant-based programs or "mobile vouchers" are an effort to provide affordable rental housing for low-income individuals and families outside of public housing developments. The largest programs in Massachusetts are the federal *Housing Choice Voucher Program* (usually called Section 8, from the federal law that first authorized it) and the *Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program* (MRVP). Several smaller programs are available for specialized populations, and Section 8 funds now include some project-based vouchers.

The reasons for tenant-based vouchers include flexibility and choice for tenants, dispersal of disadvantaged households, involvement of the private sector in housing the poor, and potentially faster responses to changing housing needs. The main disadvantages are that tight housing markets don't provide a reliable stock of needed housing and that marginal properties are subsidized during falling markets.

Funding for both the federal and state voucher programs has been cut in recent years well under applications by eligible households. Federal Section 8 funding amounts did not match inflation during the last six years, so numbers of vouchers have had to be cut while waiting lists lengthened or were closed. In 2006, Section 8 served 74,443 households in the Commonwealth. At its peak in 1990, the state-funded MRVP assisted over 14,900 households with tenant-based vouchers, but in 2005 it assisted 1,544. These cuts have exacerbated the numbers of homeless families since vouchers are the most flexible way to supply emergency housing.

* Due to space constraints, sources for this article are online at www.lwvma.org/affordablehousing.shtml.