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In Bid to Expand Section 8 as Rent Costs Soar in USVI, Housing Authority Launches Landlord Survey

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The Virgin Islands Housing Authority (VIHA) announced Monday that it is surveying private landlords to help improve a program that could increase the territory's affordable housing supply, a move that comes as families continue to struggle to meet rent obligations heightened by the pandemic-induced recession.

Through September 4th, the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) Landlords Survey is inviting landlords to share their experiences and concerns about [the program](#), also known as Section 8.

The federally funded program provides rent assistance in the form of vouchers to almost 2,000 Virgin Islanders who could not otherwise afford to live in market rate housing. Thousands more

are waiting in line because of a high demand for affordable housing, according to VIHA Executive Director Robert Graham.

“With a voucher to help with rent payments, families earning lower wages could theoretically afford to live almost anywhere in the territory,” Mr. Graham said.

But the Housing Choice Voucher Program relies heavily on landlords to accept families with vouchers, Mr. Graham noted.

Feedback from the survey will be used to strengthen the program’s appeal and attract more landlords, VIHA said.

The VIHA initiative parallels efforts at the federal level to encourage more private-market landlords to participate in the HCVP, according to the release.

"The need could not be greater as communities across the country face affordable housing crises made worse by the novel coronavirus pandemic," said VIHA. Rents in the Virgin Islands have more than doubled since the hurricanes of 2017, according to a [HUD report](#), while the estimated median household income fell 16 percent to \$31,000. (The report doesn’t take into account the effects of COVID-19.) Nationwide, the median household income rose nine percent from 2017 to to \$63,179, according to the Census Bureau, VIHA said.

Families should spend no more than 30 to 40 percent of their income on rent, experts agree. This means the average Virgin Islander can afford \$775 to \$1,000 a month for housing. Zillow and Realtor.com recently listed only a handful in the entire territory in that price range.

“A voucher not only gives the family more purchasing power to afford private sector apartments,” Mr. Graham said. “It also gives the landlord more financial security in today’s pandemic economy.”

Ninety-nine percent of landlords who accept vouchers from VIHA receive rent payments on the first of the month via paper check or direct bank deposit, according to the release.

“While we think we know the primary issues facing landlords, we are anxious to hear directly from them,” said the program’s director, Akala Anthony.

“Our objective with this survey is to understand landlords’ perceptions and misperceptions about the program and seek to make the necessary improvements,” Ms. Anthony said.

VIHA said it also supports the [EnVision](#) grants offered by the Virgin Islands Finance Authority, and encouraged landlords to apply in order to rehabilitate their storm-damaged units. The grants offer property owners \$50,000 toward the repair of each unit, provided it is used as a year-round rental for low- to moderate-income tenants for a set period.

“The EnVision program is a godsend for affordable housing because it will increase the number of private sector apartments available to families,” Mr. Graham said. “We will do everything possible to match landlords with eligible families, as all of our participants meet the low- to moderate income requirements.”

For questions or assistance, contact HCVP Program Director Akala Anthony at aanthony@vihousing.org or (340) 714-0174, ext. 8109.

