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Public housing in Rochester is no handout

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Guest essayist

As people speak to me about government-assisted programs, I often hear, "I don't believe in welfare, free lunches, subsidized housing, etc." I think I, at least, need to dispel the myth about public housing residents.

In 2007, the Rochester Housing Authority commissioned the Center for Governmental Research to undertake the Tenant Profile Study. This analysis received two awards of merit this year from the National Affordable Housing and Rehabilitation Organization. The study highlighted several very interesting findings. I would like to share a few.

Public housing resident sources of income in 2007 were:

- 18 percent have income from wages.
- 50 percent have income from Social Security or Supplemental Security Income.
- 8 percent have income from assets or pensions.
- 6 percent get public assistance.

Contrary to popular belief, a small percentage of the public housing population is receiving public assistance. The majority of our population is either working low-wage jobs or is elderly or disabled.

More facts: 47 percent of RHA households are making less than \$10,000 per year, with 37 percent making between \$10,000 and \$20,000 a year. These are hardly wages that can sustain a decent living without some form of subsidy. However, these people of extremely modest means still must pay about 30 percent of their annual income toward rent. Eighty-one percent of all public housing families pay from \$100 to \$500 per month for rent, and 5 percent pay more than \$500 per month.

It is also worth noting that the number of public housing residents receiving public assistance has been cut in half since 1999. These statistics illustrate that while subsidized housing is a good deal to assist those most in need, it is not a handout.

Public housing applicants are subject to rigorous background screening including criminal background checks. They must have good tenant histories and their incomes must be verified. Once in public housing, they must submit to HUD-mandated annual housekeeping inspections, physical property inspections and annual income verification. And they must report changes in household composition. In return, they get a break on their rent, again a helping hand, not a handout!

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