

# Section 8

## What Is It and How Does It Work?

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**The federal Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program is one of the few tools available to Kansans who struggle to afford housing. It has been shown to be extremely effective at reducing poverty and homelessness.** Vouchers are a form of rental subsidy that allow very low-income households to obtain housing from the private rental market.

Under the program, tenants pay 30% of their monthly income toward rent, and then the voucher kicks in to pick up the remainder of the monthly rent. For example, if a tenant's gross income is \$1,000 per month and a two-bedroom apartment costs \$1,200 per month, then the tenant would pay \$300 toward the rent (30% of their income) and the voucher would pick up the additional \$900.

To qualify for a voucher, a household's income must be less than 50% of the Area Median Income (AMI). However, local housing authorities are required to ensure that at least 75% of its vouchers are provided to extremely low-income (ELI) households with incomes of 30% AMI or less. In Kansas, 77% of vouchers were allocated to ELI households in 2023, and there were a total of 11,772 vouchers in use across the state.

### Limitations of the HCV Program

**Due to a limited supply of vouchers, most people who apply do not receive assistance.** Funding for the HCV program is only a fraction of what is

needed. It is estimated that only about 1 in 5 families ever receive it, which results in lengthy wait times.

**Those approved for a voucher typically wait two to three years before they actually receive it.** This can be demoralizing to Kansas families who are struggling with a housing crisis. Most are likely applying due to immediate danger of becoming homeless, not because they anticipate they'll need assistance in a few years from when they are applying.

After an applicant has waited years to get a voucher in hand, they still must navigate plenty more pitfalls. Federal guidelines require the voucher holder to find housing within 60 days or the voucher will expire and be returned to the housing authority. About 40% of those who receive a voucher end up losing it because they are unable to find a place to live within the allotted timeframe. This failure rate has been increasing over time.

**Studies have found that most landlords (as many as 88% in some markets) refuse to accept vouchers.** Voucher holders must sift through as many as 39 rental ads to find just one landlord that will accept them.

And the voucher holder is not assisted with finding suitable housing or a willing landlord. It's also the responsibility of the voucher holder to come up with the security deposit, application fees, and any additional fees that may be imposed.

**Even if a landlord accepts vouchers, the unit may not be eligible for voucher use.** The housing an applicant finds must be relatively affordable by falling within the local Fair Market Rent schedule and must pass an inspection by the local housing authority.

## History and Creation of the HCV Program

The need for federal housing assistance was first recognized in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression, and several initiatives were launched to address the housing affordability crisis across the country. **Housing construction was the primary intervention pursued during this period, and tens of thousands of public housing units were built, housing workers of all income levels.**

Public housing was viewed by many as some of the most desirable housing available. However, that perception began to change during the eras known as White Flight and Urban Renewal. White people began moving to “whites only” neighborhoods in newly built suburbs, and Black communities were systematically demolished, leading to the concentration of America’s urban Black population in public housing complexes.

**The federal government subsequently reduced funding, and public housing began suffering from neglect.** This led to rapid deterioration of the public housing stock throughout the country.

The Nixon Administration promoted a new philosophy that sought to abandon housing as a public asset and redirect public funds to the private sector. This resulted in the 1974 legislation known as the U.S. Housing Act and the creation of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program.

## Conclusion

**The Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program is effective at housing people and moving them out of poverty, but it is underfunded, difficult**

**to navigate, and is not set up to help those struggling with an immediate housing crisis.** The federal government should vastly expand the HCV program by making vouchers available to everyone in need of assistance – not have a limited number of vouchers available.

The federal government should also reverse its decades-long move away from public housing and recommit to a public option that is available to a variety of income levels. This would effectively solve discrimination issues and help regulate rent costs. Until that happens, vouchers are the best tool we have to help those in need of housing assistance. But more can also be done to help fill the gap at the state level.

**For example, the Kansas Legislature could allocate dollars in the budget toward rental assistance.**

This would serve as a lifeline to those who are in need of immediate assistance. Tenants could apply for state rental assistance at the same time they apply for a voucher. State assistance dollars would likely arrive much more quickly and solve a Kansan’s immediate need, allowing them to get stabilized while waiting for a federal voucher.

**The Legislature should also pass source of income legislation to prevent landlords from refusing to accept tenants with vouchers.**

Such laws have been passed in at least 22 states, including our neighboring states of Oklahoma and Colorado. These laws have been proven to increase voucher utilization rates and would ease housing burdens for the lowest income Kansans.

As the country grapples with an alarming housing crisis, Kansas can follow other states that have begun to address homelessness through forms of housing assistance. **Keeping Kansans housed would ensure safer homes for families, lessen budget strains on local governments, and result in healthier, happier communities.**



Kansas Action for Children is a nonprofit advocacy organization working to make Kansas a place where every child has the opportunity to grow up healthy and thrive. We work across the political spectrum to improve the lives of Kansas children through bipartisan advocacy, partnership, and information-sharing on key issues.