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SOCIAL HOUSING APPLICATION PROCESS

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends that:

- 1. The presentation from Kerry Hobbs, Manager, Housing Programs be received;**
- 2. Staff be directed to prepare a report for consideration in June, 2008 regarding the actual cost of vacancies as processed under the existing regulations and options to advocate for a more streamlined system to reduce the cost of vacancies;**
- 3. The recommendation contained in the following report, October 2, 2007, from the Commissioner of Community and Health Services be adopted.**

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. This report be received for information.

2. PURPOSE

This report responds to a request from Committee and provides an overview of the process required to obtain rent-geared-to-income housing from the initial application to placement in a unit and the factors which impact the length of time the entire process takes.

3. BACKGROUND

There are approximately 6,000 social housing units in the Region. These units are operated by 41 non-profit and co-operative housing providers and by the Region's housing company, Housing York Inc. All housing providers must fill their rent-geared-to-income units with applicants selected from the centralized waiting list maintained by the Region's Housing Access Centre. Details of waiting list volume were presented to Council on May 24, 2007 through the adoption of Clause No. 7 of Report No. 5 of the Community Services and Housing Committee.

The Community Services and Housing Committee requested information on the waiting list process to help them understand how the waiting list system works. The Committee also asked for an explanation for the length of time it takes for a household to be offered

a rent-geared-to-income unit and why rent-geared-to-income units can appear to sit vacant when the waiting list is so long.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 The centralized waiting list process is legislated

Under the *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000*, the Region is required to establish and maintain a centralized waiting list system for rent-geared-to-income housing units. This system is designed to ensure fair and easy access to social housing. The centralized waiting list is broken down into a number of subsidiary lists, one for each project of each housing provider in the service area. Each subsidiary list includes the households who have expressed an interest to reside in that building and who meet the mandate (if any) of the housing provider (e.g. only seniors can be on the waiting list for a building with a senior's mandate).

The Region's Housing Access Unit manages the waiting list

The Region's Housing Access Unit manages the waiting list from the time an applicant submits an application to the time they are housed. Housing Access Unit staff assess the initial eligibility of applicants for the waiting list and for the size and type of unit to which they are entitled. They also determine eligibility for Special Priority status for applicants who are victims of abuse. Applicants are placed on the waiting list according to the date they applied. The only exception is that applicants who have Special Priority status move ahead of all other applicants on the waiting list.

Housing Access Unit staff determine applicants' continued eligibility by reviewing application updates annually for each applicant on the waiting list. Applicants who do not submit updates when requested are no longer eligible. Housing Access Unit staff cancel their applications and remove them from the waiting list.

The Housing Access Unit process map is attached to this report (*see Attachment 1*).

Housing providers are responsible for tenant selection

When housing providers have rent-geared-to-income vacancies, they must select tenants from the waiting list. Housing providers contact applicants in chronological order (oldest application date first) from their subsidiary lists unless there are applicants with Special Priority designation. Special Priority applicants always take precedence over chronological applicants.

Before offering a unit to an applicant household, the housing provider must verify that the household's family composition and income qualify them for a rent-geared-to-income subsidy (*see Attachment 2*).

4.2 Factors affecting the waiting times for applicants

Waiting times vary considerably depending on the number of applicants in each housing category (singles/couples, seniors, families) and the number of rent-geared-to-income units available.

Applicants' choices affect their waiting times

Individual applicant waiting times also vary according to:

- The number of buildings a household selects (e.g. applicants who only select one building will typically wait much longer).
- The location of the buildings (e.g. waiting lists for buildings in the southern municipalities are longest).
- The number of bedrooms a household requires (e.g. one-bedroom units for non-seniors have the longest waiting lists).

4.3 Factors affecting the length of the rent-up process

Housing providers have cited many reasons for the length of time it takes to rent vacant rent-geared-to-income units (rent-up). The *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000* has imposed complex and costly administrative procedures for the Service Manager and housing providers.

The legislative process of contacting applicants on the subsidiary waiting list is time-consuming

Housing providers state that the amount of time and administrative tracking it takes to contact applicants at the top of their subsidiary lists before finally reaching one who qualifies for and who will accept the unit is a major issue. When the housing provider finally reaches an applicant to offer a unit, the applicant may tentatively accept the offer, subject to viewing the unit, or refuse it.

Applicant households can select many locations

The *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000* allows applicants to select as many locations on the application form as they wish. An applicant household can be on many subsidiary lists.

Sometimes applicants are so desperate for housing that they choose every building, often without knowing anything about the location. Because of the long wait for housing, they have to cope somehow and make other arrangements. Once they reach the top of the list and are offered a unit, they may refuse the unit because of the location or the desirability of a particular unit.

Some applicants apply for all locations and reach the top of many of the lists at the same time. Each of the providers has to go through the contacting process to comply with the legislation. Applicants may delay responding to one offer of housing while they entertain another. Providers have indicated that this is a particular challenge with some Special Priority households.

Applicants can refuse offers of rent-geared-to-income units

The *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000* states that a household on the waiting list ceases to be eligible if they refuse three offers of rent-geared-to-income units.

Housing providers spend a good deal of time contacting applicants when they have a vacancy. If the applicant refuses the offer, the housing provider has to go through the contacting process again.

60 Day Rule is also a factor

The *Residential Tenancies Act* (formerly the *Tenant Protection Act*) requires a tenant to give 60 days notice when they wish to leave a tenancy. When an applicant who is a renter comes to the top of the waiting list, that household has to give their current landlord 60 days notice that they intend to leave their unit. If that household accepts a rent-geared-to-income unit from a housing provider, that provider must also respect the 60 day notice period.

Special Priority Program has an impact on the process

Housing providers must contact Special Priority applicants first, when a vacancy occurs. These applicants usually select a large number of buildings to increase their chances of getting housed more quickly. Special Priority applicants are often more difficult to contact as they move around, may not have telephones or have hard-to-reach safe alternative contacts. Housing providers must contact each Special Priority applicant on their list and encountering the delays described above until one accepts the offer of a rent-geared-to-income unit. Only after the Special Priority list is exhausted, can the housing provider start the process over with the chronological list.

The effect of the Special Priority Program is more noticeable in family and mixed tenancy buildings in the southern municipalities.

Unit turnover

Some building locations are more desirable than others because of proximity to public transit, services and other amenities. Some older buildings with smaller units are less popular and much harder to rent. Other buildings have less “curb appeal” and those providers may need to make more offers before finding an applicant to accept the units. Modified units may sit empty because of the length of time it takes to match an appropriate applicant to the unit.

Some units take a long time to prepare for occupancy

Often, extra time is needed to prepare a unit for occupancy. If a tenant significantly damages the unit or the provider discovers a need for remedial work (e.g. mould), it can take longer to ready the unit for the next occupant.

4.4 The Region has undertaken some initiatives to improve the process

The Region has put in place some improvements to the system:

- **On-line access to subsidiary waiting lists for housing providers**
The Region provided funding for housing providers to upgrade their technology to allow them electronic access to their subsidiary waiting lists. Previously, the Housing Access Unit had to send the subsidiary waiting lists monthly to housing providers. Applicants are removed from the list as soon as they are housed. By using more up-to-date lists, providers encounter fewer multiple offer situations.
- **Policy and procedures manual for the Housing Access Unit**
Staff developed a manual which streamlines the Housing Access Unit process, provides more consistency and contains templates for letters in simpler language for applicants regarding the application process. As a result, the applicant information in the system is more accurate and up-to-date, thereby reducing the length of time it takes to contact applicants.
- **Designation of a specific Housing Access Unit staff to manage the process for Special Priority applicants**
The Housing Access Unit has designated one staff person to manage the Special Priority application process. This has reduced some of the complications arising from the Special Priority Program.

That same individual is also the primary contact for all of the housing providers. This provides consistency and assists in resolving issues more quickly.
- **Improved operational review cycle**
Staff have implemented a regular operational review cycle to ensure that housing providers comply with legislation. Staff monitor providers closely for such things as overly long unit turnaround times.
- **Requirement for annual updates to keep contact information current**
Although the *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000* permits annual updates on a bi-yearly basis, the Region has chosen to require applicants to submit updates annually. This helps housing providers when they are trying to contact applicants to offer units because the information will be more accurate.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The application process with its administrative complexity has resulted in increased administration costs for housing providers and the Region. There may be vacancy loss for housing providers due to the requirement of a 60 day notice period. Vacancy loss for rent-geared-to-income units is borne by the Region.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The factors which affect the length of time the entire process takes from application to move-in have been described. Overall, these factors are prescribed in legislation and regulation.

7. CONCLUSION

The waiting list system required under the *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000* has made the process fairer and more convenient for applicants. However, the new processes are administratively complex and costly for housing providers and the Region. It is a constant balancing of the rights and responsibilities of applicants with the legislated process for the Service Manager and housing providers.

For more information on this report contact Sylvia Patterson, Director, Housing Services Branch of the Community and Health Services Department.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(The attachments referred to in this clause were included in the Agenda for the October 10, 2007 Committee meeting.)