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Scarce housing limits options for area's poor

Affordability, availability, red tape cited, but federal agency predicts situation will improve with time

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With six children to raise and nowhere to live, Roxie Perkins of Gulfport recently turned to housing advocacy groups for help.

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Most of the apartment complexes where she filled out applications were full, and she wasn't sure she could afford the \$750 monthly rent they required.

Her plight is not unfamiliar to advocates on the Gulf Coast, where affordable housing is scarce and federal money to rebuild comes slowly.

"This is the face of people often unseen, the very poor, public-housing segment," said Charmel Gauden, director of the Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center. "She's virtually homeless after the storm."

Most of the 2,695 public housing units on the Coast were damaged by Hurricane Katrina on Aug. 29, 2005, and 316 were destroyed, a federal study showed.

Money earmarked to rebuild them would have been spent more quickly if a state-run program had been directed by the federal government, local housing officials said.

Yet, as of June, money earmarked to rebuild them had not been spent.

But Biloxi Housing Authority Director Bobby Hensley did not blame the state for its handling of the \$100 million Public Housing Program.

"The state's not in the housing business," he said. "I think they've done all they know how to do. Had it been handled by (federal officials) to begin with, it would have been more quickly handled."

Hensley said he and other housing officials are not as familiar with the rules of the Public Housing program because it is funded with Community Development Block Grants and uses a different set of guidelines than other U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development programs.

A HUD spokeswoman said insurance issues and environmental assessments have slowed rebuilding efforts, which she predicted will begin moving more quickly.

"You will see some rebuilding coming very soon," HUD spokeswoman Cassandra Terry said.

Housing advocates have protested that the recovery gap between lower-income and wealthier residents is widening as recovery from the storm slowly progresses.

While many middle- to upper-income homeowners have received help through the state's grant program, many who rented before the storm have said they cannot afford the increased cost of apartments.

The Biloxi agency has stopped taking applications because, Hensley said, "There's just no houses to rent for Section 8."

About 100 families in Biloxi are waiting on Section 8 vouchers, he said. Section 8 housing is privately owned rental units that participate in the low-income rental assistance program.

Federal funds unrelated to the state-run program will help rebuild 140 additional apartments in the city by the end of the

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year, Hensley said. And he expects to receive money from the state-run program within the next several months.

The state announced last spring a program to provide loans to owners of small rental properties in an effort to increase affordable housing.

But Hensley said that, right now, "I don't see the need for affordable housing being met."

The Public Housing program provides assistance to the five Housing Authorities across the Coast in areas that suffered damage from Katrina.

Funds are made available to housing officials on a "draw-down" basis as construction begins, according to the Mississippi Development Authority's Web site.

But federal law requires environmental reviews be conducted on the units before construction begins, and it's been "quite a lengthy process," Hensley said.

The state's contractor in charge of reviewing the dozen projects he submitted has "gotten quite a few done," he said.

Public housing developments also have had to wait on insurance settlements, Terry said.

Perkins is living with a friend who receives public housing assistance, but the rules require her to leave soon. She has no idea where she'll go.

"She's got kids, too, and I don't want to jeopardize nobody trying to help me," Perkins said.


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