

Chicago Low-Income Housing Voucher: \$4,000/mo.

Whatever one's opinion on government helping low-income or no-income individuals have roofs over their heads, it's probably safe to say that most people would be outraged by a government program that gives some people nearly \$4,000/mo. for housing while others get less than \$1,000/mo.

Too extreme to believe? Here's what Chicago's *Sun Times* is [reporting](#):

"After buying a home in Barrington Hills, Chaoshan Lai and his wife couldn't unload the 15-year-old townhouse that they'd bought for \$935,000 in Central Station, a taxpayer-subsidized development in the South Loop where former Mayor Richard M. Daley lived for years.

Lai couldn't even find anyone to rent the townhouse on South Prairie Avenue – until he got a call in 2013 about a woman who'd gotten a 'housing choice voucher,' from the Chicago Housing Authority through a program that had long been called Section 8.

Lai says the woman wanted to lease his three-bedroom, three-and-a-half bath home, which has a library and is within walking distance of Soldier Field and the lakefront.

'I said, "You probably cannot afford the rent,"' Lai recalls. 'But they said they have a special program in the "opportunity area" that pays much better. I said, "Let's give it a shot."'

It ended up being a good deal for Lai. Since June 1, 2013, he's collected more than \$100,000 from the CHA, which administers public housing in Chicago for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The CHA pays him \$3,911 a month in federal funds to lease his townhouse to the woman and

three others in her household, including a child under the age of 6, records show.

It also has been a good deal for Lai's tenant. She pays no rent because, CHA officials say, she has no income."

Here are more details of the program:

"As one of the main elements of that effort, the CHA is providing housing vouchers to more than 107,000 people in nearly 45,000 households in Chicago, most of them African-American. The vouchers give them a financial hand to lease apartments and homes from private landlords in any neighborhood they choose.

It's an expensive effort, costing more than \$47 million a month, with the federal government picking up \$35.9 million of that and CHA tenants paying the rest.

But the program is riddled with inequities, the Sun-Times and BGA found. Among them:

- The CHA pays for some to live in high-rent, luxury properties, largely in upscale neighborhoods that are predominantly white. Many of them contribute little or nothing toward their rent. On the other hand, thousands pay far more and remain clustered in poor, black neighborhoods on the South Side and the West Side.
- The amount of financial assistance that voucher-holders get varies widely, largely because of the CHA's willingness to provide more help to people who find homes in 'opportunity areas' that traditionally haven't welcomed public housing tenants.
- Of those receiving a voucher, 298 are leasing apartments, townhouses and single-family homes that cost \$2,000 or more a month. The CHA spends a total of \$7.5 million a year on those units, ranging from spacious homes to condos in skyscrapers.

- Taxpayers cover a higher percentage of the total rent for voucher-holders in two downtown wards than anywhere else: 87 percent in the 42nd Ward and 83 percent in the 2nd Ward.

Meanwhile, about 50,000 households remain on waiting lists to get one of the coveted vouchers, agency records show – more than the number who have vouchers.

Eighty-eight percent of households in the voucher program are headed by an African-American, most often a woman.”

Understandably, housing is more expensive in Chicago, especially downtown. [According](#) to WTTW, Chicago’s public media organization, average rent in the Chicago Loop is \$1,999-2,720 for a one-bedroom unit and \$2,300-4,121 for a two-bedroom unit. With that in mind, paying nearly \$4,000 per month for rent in the area doesn’t seem ridiculous – until the government is paying for it. Other parts of Chicago have housing available for half or less than half of that amount.

No doubt, a lot of people who are working would like to be able to spend \$4,000/mo. on housing but simply can’t afford it. Therefore, they rightly see it as an injustice and a waste of money. For those in the program or on the waiting list, they probably see the program as unfair since they’re not getting \$4,000/mo. to find housing. Of course, if they were to be selected for such a housing voucher we would hardly expect them to continue complaining about the unfairness of the program.

One of the goals of programs such as the one in Chicago is what is ultimately causing the disparities between its participants as well as the general public. Rather than simply trying to make sure people have housing, many government programs are aiming to create a more “equitable” society by taking people who are low-income or no-income and putting them into neighborhoods with high median incomes. The hope is that in doing so those who are poor or a minority will benefit from

different surroundings.

What the story reveals, ultimately, is the high cost of attempting to create an equitable society and the injustices that can be created by doing so. Furthermore, it would probably be wise for us to discuss purposes and possibilities in more depth. If government is to aid people in housing, should the goal simply be to get people roofs over their heads or to create an “equitable” society?