

The FSS requirement, with the program's escrow account, will offer a low-income family a better chance of saving funds to cover closing costs or the down payment, said O'Brien.

O'Brien also said that Belmont is using homeownership as a carrot to increase participation in FSS "because we think it is such a good program." This incentive has worked, and enrollment in FSS has increased, she said.

### Post-Purchase Counseling

A HUD-certified homeownership counseling agency, Belmont also has received funds from local mortgage lenders to provide post-purchase counseling that emphasizes home maintenance and financial management.

As an incentive to attend post-purchase counseling, Belmont is offering a home buyer kit that includes a Home Depot home repair book and a J.C. Penny tool kit. The books were purchased in bulk for \$15 each, and the tool kits were \$18, about half the retail price.

Belmont is optimistic about increasing the number of Section 8 home buyers in its service area, and it has ordered 150 home buyer kits. "We are planning big things," O'Brien said.

### PUBLIC HOUSING

## Planning Council Suggests New Program to Help Chicago Families with Temporary Vouchers

The current system of providing counseling and other services to Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) residents who receive temporary Section 8 vouchers is too fragmented and should be partially replaced with a system of "contact counselors" who would maintain regular contact with a family, according to a recent report commissioned by the Metropolitan Planning Council on CHA's behalf.

The recommendation was made to improve the temporary relocation of residents during implementation of the CHA transformation plan, which involves the rehabilitation or redevelopment of about 25,000 public housing units and the demolition of about 18,000 obsolete units.

Residents who lived in CHA units on October 1, 1999, and remain lease compliant are guaranteed by a relocation rights contract the right to return to public housing when new or rehabilitated units are completed.

The period between leaving CHA housing with a temporary voucher and returning to public housing is several years for most residents, raising the risk of losing contact with CHA and not obtaining information essential to a final decision to return to public housing or to remain in the voucher program.

### Success of Plan

The report emphasizes that the success of this part of the

transformation plan should not be measured by the number of former tenants who return, but by the extent to which families have received all the information they need to make an informed decision and the services they need to remain in compliance with a CHA lease.

Under the current relocation system, families with Section 8 vouchers are referred to a Good Neighbor orientation; CHAC, Inc., which administers the voucher program; a relocation counselor; a service connector, which emphasizes employment counseling; and the developer of a specific project for placement in public housing.

All of these entities have some responsibility for supplying social services, and all require separate interviews and multiple screening for lease compliance. The report says these repeated screening interviews waste contractor resources that could be spent on direct services and they are burdensome for families.

### Contact Counselors

Under the report's recommendations, the relocation counselors and service connectors would be replaced with the contact counselors, who would be project-based and make proactive attempts to provide information and services.

Among interviews that researchers conducted with families and administrators, the service connector program was identified as a frequent concern, with many saying it was inadequate. They said that the program did not meet the needs of the significant number of families who require intensive services to address the issues of physical or mental health, substance abuse, or family violence.

The concern is that a large number of families with these problems will not remain lease compliant or be able to meet site-specific requirements established by the developer and local advisory councils to return to a CHA development.

Under the contact counselor program, the CHA would contract with a limited number of vendors that would serve residents with the most severe problems, and counselors would refer residents to these vendors. For less demanding needs, the counselors would refer residents to the appropriate services nearest to their public housing development or the family's current residence.

The contact counselor would visit each Section 8 family promptly after its initial move to inform the family of available services and progress on the redevelopment of its public housing.

After that, the counselor would maintain contact monthly by telephone and follow up with visits at three- to six-month intervals. Eighteen months before the new public housing is available, these visits and recommendations would intensify to give families all the information they need.

("Temporary Relocation, Permanent Choice: Serving Families with Rent Vouchers During the Chicago Housing Authority Plan for Transformation" is available from the Metropolitan Planning Council, 312-922-5616, or [www.metroplanning.org](http://www.metroplanning.org).)