

Housing authority: 'not a crisis organization'

by STEVE STRASSER

Many people charge that a shortage of low-income housing exists in Lincoln, and the Lincoln Housing Authority (LHA) traditionally catches a lot of blame for the problem.

Lincoln Action Program housing specialist Maggie Malloy charged that "students seem to have priority at the Housing Authority over other low-income families."

And welfare mother Joan Wooten said welfare families "automatically get a hard time" from LHA.

Most low-income tenants in Lincoln seem to think LHA just isn't capable of serving the needs of the large number of poor families in the city.

And the Lincoln Housing Authority agrees with them. Herbert Hamilton, director of LHA's city-based leasing operations, stressed that LHA is not a crisis housing organization.

"We offer rent assistance designed to provide decent, sanitary, safe housing for low-income families on a long-range basis," he explained.

The side of the LHA operation

Hamilton directs is headquartered in a yellow-brick apartment building on 18th and J Streets.

The authority rents office space there, and the rest of the building provides homes for 85 elderly people.

LHA owns nothing itself. Its city operations depend on income from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD gives the authority enough funds to incorporate 1,350 housing units into a rent/lease program.

In this program, first set up in Lincoln in 1967, a low-income family pays a fixed percentage of its salary for rent (not over one-fourth), and LHA picks up the rest of the tab with its HUD funds.

Of the 1,350 authorized units, LHA now has about 1,126 under lease in this program. The money it receives from HUD for the remaining 220 units in its quota is used for office rental and staff salaries. The housing authority is a non-profit organization.

About 450 landlords provide the units in LHA's lease rent program.

Most of these are individuals, but one corporation composed mostly of Lincoln realtors has invested in Northwood Terrace on 23rd and Y streets.

The corporation has turned over, after HUD approval, all 77 units at Northwood Terrace to the Lincoln Housing Authority for inclusion in its program.

Much of the criticism directed towards LHA deals with the authority's alleged discriminatory practices against welfare families. More than 70 per cent of LHA units are occupied by small student families and elderly couples.

But director Hamilton claimed this was because of the breakdown of types of units available to the authority. He said 640 of the units are either efficiency or one-bedroom apartments, and only 350 have three or more bedrooms - the amount of space a large family would need.

So a student may apply for and get a suitable unit quickly and easily, but a family of five would have to wait years sometimes before a unit became available through the LHA.

The shortage of large accommodations persists despite a program whereby a tenant can find his own dwelling and have it placed in the authority's rent/lease program after his landlord agrees, and after the authority conducts an inspection to make sure the unit qualifies under federal guidelines.

The Lincoln Housing Authority cannot provide every low-income family in Lincoln with suitable housing through its rent/lease program. The problem seems to be that the program is only designed to be one way to get a home, not the way.

Actually the city office is only half the LHA story. The authority also acts as an organ of the city government, most visibly at Lincoln Air Park.

Richard Burke, executive director of the authority and principle overseer at the Air Park, explained that the prime responsibility of LHA in this area is to administer the operation and maintenance of the 1,000 units the city of Lincoln purchased from the Air Force last July.

Only some of the Air Park units are eligible for the HUD rent/lease program. LHA works for the city in this separate role, not the federal government.

Burke reported the City is currently looking for a builder to put up 120 additional city-owned units - mostly of the badly-needed three, four, and five bedroom type. Administration of these units will also be an LHA responsibility, and city officials hope eventually to operate all LHA units similarly to the ones in the rent/lease program.

