

Seniors search for affordable housing

City program may help the elderly find better living situations through sharing program.

By Melanie Hicken

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CITY HALL — Community development officials could soon be playing matchmaker for financially strapped seniors looking to share housing costs.

The Housing Authority on Tuesday directed city officials to investigate resurrecting a program to connect struggling seniors through a shared-housing program.

As the economy continues to falter, city officials have reported an increased demand among Glendale's elderly residents for more affordable-housing options. A shared-housing program — in which the city would help match potential roommates — could help meet the increased demand, officials said.

“We have a lot of working-class folks who are in a bind, and we have a lot of seniors in particular who need some assistance,” Councilman John Drayman, chairman of the Housing Authority, said Tuesday.

Council members said shared housing might work well in Glendale because of the large elderly population. About 15% of the city's residents were older than 65 in the 2007 census, compared with the 12.5% national average.

Glendale operated a shared-housing program from 1986 to 1992 through the Senior Services Program of the Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department. In that program, a community services coordinator conducted outreach and held events to introduce homeowners and potential tenants, but did not conduct reference or background checks. The program was discontinued when the coordinator running the program left the city.

About 973,000 seniors in California live alone — 50% of whom do not have enough income to meet basic expenses, according to a UCLA Center for Health Policy Research study released Thursday.

While there have been limited requests for shared housing among seniors, it doesn't mean there wouldn't be more if such a program were offered and marketed, Deputy Housing Director Peter Zovak said.

Benefits of shared programs include helping to provide seniors affordable housing,

companionship and security, city officials said. Seniors who have a room to rent out can gain income, while potential roommates would benefit from cheaper rent.

“A shared-housing program does represent a viable alternative to affordable-housing programs,” Interim Director of Community Development and Housing Jess Duran said Tuesday.

Potential stumbling blocks could include liability issues and unequal expectations or disagreements between program participants, officials said.

City Manager Jim Starbird said contracting with a nonprofit would likely be the best option if the program is pursued because it could help the city avoid potential liability issues.

West Hollywood-based nonprofit Alternative Living for the Aging — which works to provide affordable-housing options for seniors — provides shared housing matching services to several nearby cities, including West Hollywood, Los Angeles and Culver City. Contract costs for the three cities range from \$15,800 to \$56,683, according to the city report.

Seniors with extra rooms available are matched with other seniors or with younger tenants, who can help out around the house and with transportation, said Brian Cortese, executive director of operations and finance for the nonprofit.

Counselors advertise their services and meet individually with all interested participants.

“They help to find a good match, to find out if it’s right for them,” he said. “And then we go through the process to help facilitate people who are compatible with one another.”

Still, Councilwoman Laura Friedman said all possible options should be explored before committing the city to any one path.

“It seems to be an awful lot of money for not a lot of people served,” she said, citing a report that stated only a handful of people had been matched so far in West Hollywood. “I want to be sure that there are not other options for the same amount of money that could service more people.”

Cortese said he had spoken with Glendale officials, and planned to begin formulating a plan tailored to Glendale. “I do think this is worth pursuing,” Mayor Frank Quintero said. “I think economically, we are going to serve some of our residents.”

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