

Misconceptions About Public Housing

"Home is where we tie one end of the thread of life." – Martin Buxbaum, writer, public relations director for Marriott Corporation, and poet (1912-1991)

"I have an answering machine in my car. It says, 'I'm home now. But leave a message and I'll call when I'm out.'" – Steven Wright, deadpan stand-up comic

"Home" is a special word that can powerfully suggest a place, a feeling, a memory, or a hope.

As a Legal Aid lawyer, I know that sometimes the general public may have a few misconceptions about public housing, which provides homes to many members of our communities.

Q. What exactly is public housing?

Public housing provides decent and safe rental housing for eligible low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

Public housing comes in all sizes and types, from scattered single family houses to high-rise apartments for elderly families. Tennessee has 89 public housing agencies which manage units where several thousand Tennesseans live.

"Public housing" means that:

- (1) housing units are available for rental by low- and very low-income families and individuals at rates they can afford;
- (2) the units are owned by independent local Public Housing Agencies; and
- (3) HUD (the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) provides financial help with the construction or purchase, rehabilitation, and operation of buildings for use as rental housing for the poor.

Q. Is public housing basically a program for young single moms with kids?

No. "The average age of the head of household in local public housing is 42 years old," notes Kurt Tschaeppe, executive director of the Gallatin Housing Authority. "This statistic shatters the stereotype that most public housing residents are young, single mothers."

Q. Are adults in public housing allowed or encouraged to work?

Yes. Many residents in public housing are employed. One of the goals of public housing is to help those who are able to gain skills that make them employable. With training and a "hand up," many heads of households make the transition to private rental housing or even to first-home ownership.

Many persons who live in public housing are simply unable to work due to severe disabilities. Rent for residents of public housing is set at affordable rates based on actual income and the ability to pay, which are monitored regularly.

Q. Are there any public service obligations for public housing residents?

Yes. Residents who are physically able to work must perform at least 8 hours of community service per month if they are not employed or in school. Residents might work in nursing homes, in schools, in daycare centers, in the local hospital, or at area community service agencies.

Q. Are crime rates higher in public housing?

No. Crime rates in public housing are often well below that of the general public. When individuals and families apply for public housing, they are carefully screened, and are checked not only for criminal records, but also on their records as tenants with private landlords.

Public housing authorities have strict rules against criminal conduct or violent acts by tenants or their guests. They work closely with law enforcement to keep public housing residents as safe as possible.

Conclusion: Public housing residents often do not get the credit they deserve. They, like all members of the community, are entitled to be treated with respect and with dignity.

by Jim Hawkins, Managing Attorney, Gallatin office, Legal Aid Society

Note: This column is not intended to take the place of legal advice. All cases are different and need individual attention. Consult with a private attorney of your choice to review the facts and law specific to your case.

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