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Critics See Flaws in a Program to Help the Homeless Pay Rent

By SEWELL CHAN

A 17-month-old city program to help homeless people leave shelters by paying part of their rent is drawing criticism from advocates and lawmakers, who say that while well-intentioned, the program is flawed because it discourages participants from working and has placed hundreds of families in crumbling and decrepit apartments.

The program, Housing Stability Plus, is open to families with children who have been living in shelters for at least 90 days and adults who have been in shelters for 9 of the previous 12 months. The participants must be receiving public assistance.

Councilman Bill de Blasio, a Brooklyn Democrat, joined housing advocates yesterday at a news conference at City Hall to criticize the way the city has run the program. They cited the handling of the case of Lisa W. Hendley, 26, as an example of its failings.

Ms. Hendley and her daughter, now 5, moved into a one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx in February 2005 after living in a shelter for victims of domestic violence. Ms. Hendley, a high school graduate, found an \$8-an-hour job packaging groceries for Fresh Direct, the online grocery delivery service, in June 2005.

But she said she quit the job after a Department of Homeless Services caseworker told her that she could not continue to work and receive the rental assistance. Ms. Hendley said that the apartment, which costs \$820 a month, was infested with rats and roaches and often had no water. "I'm constantly running in circles, without end," said Ms. Hendley, who said she also lacked adequate child care.

The Bloomberg administration began the program in December 2004 in response to a sharp decline in the number of Section 8 rental assistance vouchers, which are financed by the federal government.

Since then, the city program, which provides a rental supplement that is gradually phased out over five years, has grown quickly. As of April, 6,584 leases for permanent housing had been signed under the program, including leases for 5,991 families with children. By comparison, 3,788 families in New York City were placed in Section 8 housing in 2004.

However, the program has faced mounting criticism in the past several months. In March, the City Council speaker, Christine C. Quinn, introduced a bill that would prohibit the city from referring rental assistance clients to properties with a history of serious building code violations.

Last month, members of the Council's General Welfare Committee analyzed 418 buildings in Brooklyn and the Bronx where Housing Stability Plus leases have been signed and concluded that 39 percent would not meet the minimum code standards as defined in Ms. Quinn's bill.

The Department of Homeless Services has challenged the criticism, saying it inspects apartments before

certifying them for leasing. At an April 27 hearing, Fran S. Winter, the acting commissioner, said the department checked city databases for lead-based-paint violations, orders to vacate and illegal conversions. In addition, a reviewer examines each apartment for running water, heat, carbon monoxide and smoke detectors, window guards and other housing features, she said.

"Banning shelter clients from competing for decent affordable housing with other low-income New Yorkers would have the likely effect of keeping families in shelters for increased periods of time," Ms. Winter said.

A department spokeswoman, Angela Allen, declined to discuss Ms. Hendley's case yesterday, but said that the city was seeking state aid to allow people to work while receiving the rental aid. "The city continues to advocate for a work-transition supplement with the state as part of our ongoing efforts to promote self-sufficiency for families leaving shelters," she said.

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