

“Stepping Forward” — A huge step back for Seattle’s most vulnerable

Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) was created to provide affordable public housing for those most in need. But SHA’s proposed Stepping Forward program is a cruel trick to force people out of housing at a time when rents are sky high and jobs are scarcer than ever. SHA should be fighting for enough housing for the more than 24,000 people on its waiting list rather than searching for ways to push existing tenants onto the streets.

SHA rents are typically calculated using the federal standard of 30% of income. The proposed plan would make a dramatic change for anyone with a “work-able” adult in their household. A “work-able” individual is someone between the ages of 24-61 years old who does not have a disability that prevents them from holding a job. Under Stepping Forward, all “work-able” households will be hit with rent increases *whether or not the potential worker finds a job.*



Stepping Forward would charge rent based on apartment size, like commercial landlords do, with stepped increases over time. A three bedroom apartment costing \$170 per month is projected to go up to \$400 in the second and third years, and reach \$970 in the sixth and seventh years. The next step could be as high as \$1,661. These increases are imposed regardless of ability to pay. After five years, a tenant would need to earn almost \$20 an hour to afford a two or three bedroom unit. Those who can’t pay face eviction and possible homelessness. The families who are

disproportionately impacted are immigrants, people of color and single parents, particularly single mothers, whose poverty rate in Seattle is over 37%.

Back to the bootstraps theory

SHA is wrong in asserting that folks need increased rents as an “incentive” to find jobs and leave public housing. SHA argues that rent hikes are not a problem because tenants will be provided with workforce advisers who will help them identify “all the steps ... to find a job, get a better job, or start a business.” But access to resources is no guarantee of finding a well-paid job in this dreary economic climate.

Due to Seattle’s notoriously large gender wage gap, women will face extra difficulties finding jobs that can cover the rent. Another huge roadblock for moms is finding affordable, quality care for their children — Washington is among the ten states with the most expensive childcare. Learning English, lack of transportation, having funds to start a business or go to school — SHA says these aren’t barriers, just steps in a plan that each individual must solve on their own. What about job discrimination against immigrants, people of color, and people over 40? And what about the “work-able” tenant — most likely an unpaid female caregiver — whose assistance is needed by a disabled or elderly family member? Not SHA’s problem.

Stepping Forward resembles the reactionary moralism of Bill Clinton’s 1996 Personal

Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. That welfare reform forced many single parents into low-wage jobs that sometimes displaced public workers. Welfare rolls dropped dramatically but the poor got poorer. Contrary to racist and sexist stereotypes, poverty is not caused by laziness but by a system that prioritizes corporate profits over human needs. Capitalist profits boom when people are desperate to accept any job at any wage.

Stepping towards privatization

With the federal government continuously reducing funds for public housing and services, SHA is orienting to the private market. Instead of focusing on low-income housing, it is side-tracked by its billion-dollar “market rate” property development at Yesler Terrace. Co-investors Vulcan, Inc. and JP Morgan Chase are not looking out for the needs of Seattle’s poor but are looking hungrily at the profits to be made from high-end apartments, condominiums, and commercial rentals.

Private partners in such developments in other major cities are preventing the public from accessing housing by requesting harsh screening criteria for new residents.

Stepping Forward is another front in the attack to reduce government services, sell-off community resources, and contract-out public employment.

Hold SHA accountable to the community!

The government has the responsibility to take care of those most in need. Affordable, quality housing is a right that should be guaranteed to all.

This fight affects all who live in the region. Elimination of the standard that rent should be no more than 30% of income removes the “anchor” of what is considered affordable and will make housing more costly for everyone.

We call on the SHA Board of Commissioners, the City Council and the Mayor to pull the plug on Stepping Forward and to demand that this public entity produce expanded affordable public housing.

Tenants, public workers, unionists, community activists, and feminists must work together to eliminate homelessness, poverty, unemployment and discrimination through winning the following steps:

- **Expanded subsidized housing** and no privatization of public housing
- **Well-paid jobs** for all through massive public works programs, subsidized training and tuition, and affirmative action in jobs and education
- Publicly funded 24-hour **childcare** for all ages
- Elimination of the state ban on **rent control**
- Funding for social programs by **taxing the rich and corporations** and redirecting federal dollars from bloated war and military spending