

La Mesa to provide rental subsidies to seniors

Jewish Family Service officials hope to launch program in more cities

BY GARY WARTH

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LA MESA — Up to 40 La Mesa seniors will begin receiving \$500 monthly rental subsidies this year as part of a pilot program the city is launching to help prevent older residents from becoming homeless.

The La Mesa City Council approved \$300,000 for the program in February 2024, with the money coming from the \$10.8 million the city received in federal American Rescue Plan Act funding.

Last month, the council approved a \$70,000 contract with Jewish Family Service of San Diego to run the program.

“The La Mesa City Council recognizes that housing affordability is a critical issue for seniors, many of whom live on fixed incomes and face increasing rental costs,” La Mesa Mayor Mark Arapostathis said in an email.

Arapostathis also noted that 25% of individuals engaged by the city’s Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement team in 2023 were older than 55, and the number of seniors entering homelessness continues to rise.

JFS Chief Operating Officer Dana Toppel said La Mesa is the first city they have contracted with for the rental assistance program, and she hopes other cities will also sign on.

The program is called a shallow senior subsidy rental assistance because it provides just a portion of a person’s rent, which Toppel said is often enough to prevent someone from becoming homeless.

“It’s a lot more cost-effective in the long run than having older adults with major medical issues living on our streets or in their cars,” she said. “So not only is it more dignified, but it’s also financially very prudent.”

Toppel said a University of San Francisco study in 2023 found that monthly subsidies of \$300 to \$500 or one-time subsidies of \$5,000 to \$10,000 can keep seniors housed or help them become re-housed.

Locally, Serving Seniors conducted a study in 2021 that found \$300 a month could stabilize housing for seniors, which led to the county Board of Supervisors funding a \$3 million pilot program to provide \$500 a month to 220 seniors.

JFS Director of Nutrition and Aging Services Kristine Stensberg said the nonprofit created its own privately funded fund to provide rental assistance for 27 Jewish seniors before contracting with La Mesa. With the first payments expected to go out in May, Stensberg said the subsidies will help keep La Mesa seniors in their homes, while JFS caseworkers will help tenants with various services over the next year.

Those services include helping people with their budgets so they still can make ends meet when the subsidy ends, she said. Besides the county's shallow subsidy program, the city of San Diego's Housing Commission also provides rental subsidies for seniors, with the city providing an average monthly subsidy of \$372 and Serving Seniors providing case management.

Paul Downey, president and CEO of Serving Seniors, said the program has been a success, but with a caveat.

While the intention was for seniors to find more-affordable housing while receiving a subsidy over a finite period, Downey said that plan has been a challenge because of a housing shortage.

"When we first proposed shallow rent subsidies, we thought it would be buying time, but rents skyrocketing has made it really difficult to find alternative housing for folks," he said.

With seniors on a fixed income and little alternative affordable housing available, Downey said another long-term solution could be a type of "mini-housing voucher" that would continue to pay partial rent indefinitely.

Still, he said shallow subsidies even over finite periods can play an important role in keeping people housed and helping tenants cover unpaid back rent that could cause evictions. As the vice chair of the California Commission on Aging, Toppel advocates for statewide shallow subsidy programs. Attempts have failed so far.

In 2024, a California Senate bill that would have created a state shallow subsidy was vetoed by Gov. Gavin Newsom and a state Assembly bill that also would

have created a similar program failed.

An information session for applicants to the La Mesa program is scheduled for 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. and 6 to 7 p.m. March 20 at the Adult Enrichment Center, 8450 La Mesa Blvd. People also can call 619-667-1322 to reserve 20-minute appointments that will be available March 24, 26 and 27.

Eligible applications are La Mesa residents 55 or older whose income is below 50% of the area median income and have more than 50% of their income going to housing or are at risk of homelessness. Priority will be given to households 65 or older and are at or below 30% of the area median income.