



101 W. Broad St., Suite #101  
Richmond, Virginia 23220  
804-648-1012 or 800-868-1012  
Fax: 804-649-8794

229 North Sycamore Street  
Petersburg, Virginia 23803  
804-862-1100 or 800-868-1012  
Fax: 804-861-4311

1000 Preston Avenue, Suite B  
Charlottesville, Virginia 22903  
434-296-8851 or 800-390-9983  
Fax: 434-296-5731

## **Federally Subsidized Housing – Unit Based (including public housing)**

### **What is federally subsidized housing?**

Federally subsidized housing means that the government pays part or all of your rent. The part of your rent the government pays is called the “subsidy.” Unlike private rental housing, landlords in federally subsidized housing have many more rules to follow. These rules decide about who gets into the housing (admissions), rents, leases, grievances, and evictions. If you live in federally subsidized housing, you have more legal rights than tenants in private rental housing. These rights include the following things.

- The landlord must follow certain rules about who gets admitted to the housing.
- Your rent is limited.
- Usually you pay no more than 30% of your income for rent and utilities.
- Your tenancy usually is not time limited. As long as you don’t break the lease or the law, you are allowed to stay.
- You may be evicted only for good cause.
- Usually you must be given notice and a chance to contest a denial of admission.
- Before your subsidy may be ended, you must be given notice and a chance to contest.

### **What are the types of federally subsidized housing?**

There are two types of federally subsidized housing. In one type, the subsidy is tied to the housing unit. This is called “unit-based assistance.” In the other type, the subsidy is tied to the tenant. This is called “tenant-based assistance.” This article is about unit-based assisted housing. Other articles on this web site are about tenant-based assisted housing.

### **What is unit-based assisted housing?**

There are many types of unit-based assisted housing.

- Public housing owned and operated by a public housing authority (PHA).
- FHA §221(d)(3) and §236 housing, which usually is privately owned rental housing insured and subsidized by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA).
- FmHA §515 rural rental housing, which usually is privately owned rental housing, insured and subsidized by the Rural Housing Service (formerly Farmers Home Administration).

- §8 new construction, substantial rehabilitation, and moderate rehabilitation, which usually is privately owned rental housing insured and subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

### **How do I apply for unit-based assisted housing?**

In public housing, you usually apply at the PHA. In other unit-based assisted housing, you apply at the management office for the project. In all programs your application must be accepted, unless the waiting list is so long there is no reasonable chance you can get housing within a year. You can apply at more than one housing agency. Each housing agency has its own system for applications. Sometimes there are long waiting lists. If you're willing to move, you might find a housing agency that can offer you housing right away. So check around.

Once your application is accepted, your name is put on a waiting list. You must be told about preferences for admission. You may be required from time to time to say you are interested in admission. If you fail to do so, your name may be removed from the waiting list.

Waiting lists usually are kept by number of bedrooms needed. Waiting lists also may be separated based on preferences for admission. When there is a vacancy, the unit must be offered in the order of bedroom size, preferences, and date & time of application.

### **Who may get a preference for unit-based assisted housing?**

The landlord may give a preference to these people: working people, the disabled, the elderly (age 62 or older), the homeless, victims of domestic violence, and people who live in a particular area.

### **Who may be admitted to unit-based assisted housing?**

The landlord must use the following rules to decide who gets admitted.

- Usually, your income can be no more than 80% of area median (average) income. Income limits vary from area to area, so you may be eligible at one housing agency but not another.
- There is no resource limit. If you have more than \$5,000 in assets, part of that can be counted as income.
- There is no minimum income requirement. However, the landlord may look at your ability to pay basic subsidized rent.
- The landlord may not use your race, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, source of income, handicap, age, or past bankruptcy against you.
- Both single individuals and families may be admitted. Some units are reserved for elderly and handicapped families.
- Only U.S. citizens and eligible immigrants may be admitted.

The landlord must have written rules to decide who gets admitted. These rules must be based on your fitness as a tenant. The landlord may look at your past behavior in paying debts

and bills, especially rent. The landlord also may look at your past behavior as a tenant. In addition, the landlord may look at your criminal record, if it involves crimes of physical violence to persons or property, or crimes affecting other tenants.

If the landlord gets things not in your favor, the landlord also must look at things in your favor that would show your fitness as a tenant. The landlord must look at the time, nature and extent of your behavior, and whether it has gotten better. The landlord also must look at whether you are in (or will be in) social service, counseling, training or job programs, and whether you are willing to increase your income.

If you don't get admitted, the landlord must give you a written notice telling you why. This notice must tell you of your right to contest the denial in writing and/or in person.

### **How is rent set in unit-based assisted housing?**

In federally subsidized housing, your rent is less than it would be without the subsidy. Usually you pay 30% of your adjusted monthly income for your housing costs. Your housing costs means both rent and utilities. Your adjusted monthly income means your total income minus certain deductions. There are deductions for dependents, elderly and disabled families, high medical expenses, and costs of child care needed to go to work or school.

If all utilities except telephone are included in the rent, your rent is 30% of your adjusted monthly income. If all utilities except telephone are not included in your rent, your rent is 30% of your adjusted monthly income minus a "utility allowance." A utility allowance is the reasonable cost of a modest amount of utilities.

If the utility allowance is more than 30% of your adjusted monthly income, you pay no rent. You also get a monthly utility allowance check equal to the difference.

To be sure you pay the right amount of rent, you must report your income at least once a year. You also must report changes in income and family size right away.

### **What does the lease say in unit-based assisted housing?**

You must be given a written lease. The lease must tell you the amount of rent, when rent is due, the landlord's duty to keep the housing in good repair, your rights and duties, the way to handle disputes, and the way to handle evictions. Everything in the lease must be reasonable.

### **How do I handle problems in unit-based assisted housing?**

In most federally subsidized housing, if you have a problem with the landlord, you may ask for a grievance hearing. You must ask for this in writing. You must ask for a hearing within 10 days after anything you disagree with. You can use a grievance to deal with things like repairs, security, guests and visitors, and the amount of rent owed, without going to court.

The hearing is held in front of an unbiased person. You may look at the landlord's records, be represented, present evidence, question the landlord's evidence, and have a written decision. If you win the decision, your landlord must follow it. If you lose the decision, you still may contest it if the dispute goes to court.

### **What are the reasons for eviction from unit-based assisted housing?**

All federally subsidized housing landlords must have a good reason to evict you. This means breaking the lease in a major way or many times, breaking the law in a major way or many times, or some other good reason. A good reason would be not paying rent, not obeying the lease, damaging property, or causing a danger to health or safety.

You must get an eviction notice from your landlord before you can be taken to court. The notice must tell you the specific reasons for eviction. The reasons must be clear enough to let you defend against them. The notice must tell you how and by what date to contest the decision to evict, and the proposed date for ending your tenancy. The notice also must tell you that the landlord must use court to evict you, that you have the right to present defenses, and that only the reasons stated in the notice can be used to evict you.

### **What notice is needed to evict me from unit-based assistance?**

To evict you for not paying rent, your landlord must give you a written notice to either move or pay rent in 5 days. In public housing, you must be given 14 days to move or pay rent. If you pay the rent in 5 days (or 14 days in public housing), you get to stay. If you don't pay, your landlord can start an unlawful detainer action (an eviction) in General District Court (GDC). Even then, if your landlord's only reason for eviction is non-payment of rent, you get to stay if you pay amounts owed. These amounts owed are:

- all rent and arrears,
- late charges and attorney's fees contracted for in a written rental agreement,
- interest, and
- court costs.

The Summons for Unlawful Detainer lists all rent, late charges, attorney's fees, interest and court costs. If a new month's rent is due after you get the Summons, but before the date that you pay, you will have to pay that as well.

You must pay these amounts owed *on or before* your first court return date. The Summons for Unlawful Detainer lists your return date and time. You may pay these amounts owed to your landlord, your landlord's attorney, or the court. If you pay these amounts owed, you need to get a written receipt. You need to come to court on your court date even if you have paid these amounts owed, and bring your receipts. You can prevent eviction by paying these amounts owed only once each year that you continue to live in the same place.

To evict you for any other reason, your landlord usually must give you a 21/30 day written notice to move. This notice must explain the problem or reason the landlord wants to

evict. If you correct the problem in 21 days, you get to stay. If not, the landlord can start an unlawful detainer action in GDC.

To evict you for a reason that can't be corrected, your landlord must give you a written notice to move in 30 days. If you don't move by the end of the 30 days, the landlord can start an unlawful detainer action in GDC.

### **Are there defenses to eviction?**

You may have a defense to the eviction. One defense is that the landlord did not keep the place in good shape. To use this defense, you must be current in rent and you must tell the landlord about the problem. You should do this in writing by certified mail to the landlord, before the unlawful detainer is filed. You also must pay rent to court instead of the landlord.

Another defense is that the landlord wants to evict because you complained or used legal rights. To use this defense, the landlord must know that you complained to the landlord or government agency about a rental housing problem, or that you joined a tenant's group, before the unlawful detainer is filed.

### **What are the court eviction procedures?**

Your landlord can evict only by filing a lawsuit in GDC. A hearing will be held. If the judge rules in your favor, you get to stay. If the judge rules in your landlord's favor and you came to court, the judge must give you at least 10 more days in which to move. If you have not moved by the end of the 10 days, the landlord, based on the court order, can get a Writ of Possession. This allows the Sheriff to remove you and your belongings, from the premises.

If the judge rules in your landlord's favor and you did not come to court, the Writ of Possession may be issued immediately.

Your landlord may not cut off utilities, lock you out of the rental unit, or evict you without giving notice and going to court. You don't have to move just because your landlord tells you to leave. You don't have to move even if your landlord takes out an unlawful detainer. Your landlord must wait until a court order is issued. These steps usually take more than two months from the day you get a notice to move.

If a landlord cuts off utilities, locks you out of the rental unit, or evicts you without giving notice and going to court, you have a quick remedy. Go to General District Court and file a Tenant's Petition for Relief from Unlawful Exclusion (Form DC-431). You can file this on your own, by yourself, without an attorney.