‘A nightmare of epic proportions’: Thousands of Mass. residents languish on subsidized housing wait lists

The Globe talked to three residents about their years-long journey to find an affordable place to call home.

By Diti Kohli Globe Staff, Updated July 7, 2023, 8:40 a.m.

Laura and Herman Rooks, shown with their 10-year-old grandson Cameron Rooks, have been on the Section 8 waiting list with the Boston Housing Authority since 2011. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

n the surface, they do not appear to have all that much in common.
Laura Livingston works full time and lives with her baby in a homeless shelter in Upham’s Corner. Lindsey Angerame is single and disabled in Fall River. And the Rooks — Herman and Laura — get by on fixed income in Lower Mills.

But the three households share a singularly maddening experience: sitting in a long queue for subsidized housing in Massachusetts. It’s a familiar story of patience and purgatory for tens of thousands of people who languish for years on wait lists that have only gotten longer and longer still.

“I thought it was going to be a short process,” said Livingston, who has been on a wait list for more than a year. “Then I discovered quickly that it’s not. It was never going to be.”

Among the lesser-known aspects of Massachusetts’ acute housing crisis are the myriad wait lists low-income residents go on to become eligible for a subsidized home. There is not one, but rather dozens of different lists — each maintained by a local housing authority or nonprofit. There are also different types of aid people can apply for, such as vouchers for a market-rate apartment, a lottery for an affordable unit set aside in a new apartment building, or acceptance to a traditional public housing complex.
Since the inception of wait lists in the past century, there has scarcely been a time when there were enough affordable units in Massachusetts to meet demand. And recent data shows the state is moving backward.

In 2017, the average wait time across the lists was two years. By last year, it had doubled to four, according to a January report from the advocacy organization Housing Works. Wait times have grown fastest among residents who make between 30 and 60 percent of the area median income, or roughly $40,000 to $80,000 for a family of three in Greater Boston.

The longest lists stretch nearly two decades. Some particularly lengthy queues are closed to new applications altogether.

Laura and Herman Rooks were recently threatened with eviction, after their rent was raised by $380. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF
Metro Housing Boston, the nonprofit agency that administers nearly half of the available Section 8 vouchers in the state, is currently distributing them to people who applied in 2009 — 14 years ago. Even elderly residents, given priority due to their age and medical complications, often must wait upward of one year, said Nina Lordi, a case manager at the Community Day Center in Waltham.

Compare that to the 1990s, when it was common to wait only six months for an apartment.

**Average waitlist times over time**

Since 2017, waitlist times have increased from around two to four years, particularly among low-income residents who make between 30 and 60 percent of the area median income.

Housing authority directors and advocates all use the same few words to describe the wait list system: ineffectual, bureaucratic, broken. “A nightmare of epic proportions,” as one put it.

They decry the lack of a centralized application among the agencies that manage vouchers and subsidized apartments, and the disorganization of the process. Some authorities only take applications in writing; others require an online process with a
different portal and password and caseworker for each. Applicants can be rejected for something as minute as an unchecked box.

Occasionally people remain on a wait list for years, only to learn that they are not eligible when they reach the front of the line, said Chris Norris, executive director of Metro Housing Boston.

“People will put their names on as many as possible,” he said. “But it takes an expert to navigate the system we’ve created, because it’s so byzantine.”

Beyond bureaucracy and bloat is a more fundamental problem. There are simply not enough affordable units for all the people who need them, and little turnover among people who have them. Applicants who claw their way into a low-cost apartment are unlikely to give it up anytime soon, and a well-documented shortage of housing at all price points simmers below it all.

Without a centralized list, it’s hard to even know how many people are waiting for a subsidized unit. Disparate figures abound. The Boston Housing Authority counts more than 37,000 people on its wait list. Some 57,000 are on the statewide list for a Section 8 voucher. Metro Housing Boston gets about 1,300 new applications a month.

Each is from someone like Livingston or Angerame or the Rooks, longing for the day they have an inexpensive place of their own to call home.

**A year and change**

Laura Livingston had no problem paying rent for six years in Attleboro until summer 2021, when her landlord declined to renew her lease and other available apartments became too expensive. A difficult pregnancy landed Livingston in the hospital and temporarily out of work. Soon, she, her partner, and their baby were in a shelter in Dorchester. Her possessions are in storage in Everett.
Livingston thought finding an apartment would be a struggle, but not an impossibility. She holds down two jobs: one as a customer service agent at Logan Airport, the other at the front desk of a Waltham hotel. Her partner installs air conditioners. Their credit is less than stellar, but combined they earn around $50,000 a year. And on paper, there are options galore.

The 44-year-old applied for subsidized two-bedrooms priced around $2,500 in every town within commuting distance. She saved her applications — more than 40 in all — in color-coded folders. But after 18 months or so, she has little more than paperwork to show for it.

One broker reached out last year about an apartment in Arlington. Livingston verified her income and submitted a background check. Then, nothing.

A view of townhouses on Alexander Street in Upham’s Corner. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF
“It felt like they forgot about me,” Livingston said. “Like they dangled a home and took it away. The same reply that I keep hearing over and over again is that nothing is available.”

She is now on a 20-person short list for a unit in West Roxbury that will be drawn by lottery.

It’s a common predicament for families across Greater Boston, as a growing housing crunch forces more residents onto wait lists. The pandemic and its economic fallout pushed people toward the poverty line, and advocates contend that even new, lower-cost housing being built is beyond the means of those with meager paychecks.

The consequences are borne out by data: In 2019, the state had 48.6 housing units for every 100 extremely low-income households who earn an average of $12,000 a year, according to the New England Public Policy Center. Now it’s 43 units per 100 households, said Norris of Metro Housing Boston.

That requires people such as Livingston to put an inordinate amount of effort into simply surviving. Most weekdays, she leaves for work at 3 a.m. and returns to the shelter in the evening to make calls to caseworkers — if she has the energy. Her 2-year-old’s day is spent within the bounds of a small room, with just a few toys and a crib.

“We were never supposed to be here for long,” Livingston said. “But here we are.”

Four years

In the life of Lindsey Angerame, 2019 was a golden age. She had an apartment in Pawtucket, a son in high school, and a waitressing gig that brought in $200 in tips on a good night. Years of violent relationships were behind her, and she was finally off food stamps. Hopeful, Angerame began researching first-time home-buyers programs in earnest.
Then in April, she got hit by a car in Attleboro.

It left Angerame with a $5,000 ambulance bill and a spate of injuries — head trauma, road rash, a swollen disk, several broken bones in her foot — so severe it altered the course of her life. She drained her savings paying rent and utilities for four months, desperate to get back on her feet slinging orders and delivering veal parmesan at the restaurant again. Only in the fall did her podiatrist deliver the news: “You can’t go back to that job.”

To avoid eviction, Angerame moved out of her apartment and into a homeless shelter. She applied for disability and went back on food stamps. Her life was thrown into the muddy waters of wait lists.

She and her son rotated through two shoddy apartments until they ended up in a two-bedroom in Fall River, leased and paid for by a local homelessness prevention
organization. But misfortune followed her, prompting her to want to move on: The landlord towed her car and openly admitted to not wanting to rent to a tenant on public assistance. Her ex-boyfriend discovered where she lives.

Many of Angerame’s applications for subsidized housing were submitted four years ago. Still, progress has been slow. She expressed interest in 66 towns on the state’s common housing application, but not one viable option has yet surfaced. Multiple cities deprioritized her for not living “locally.”

If she misses a correspondence from a housing agency, they could take her off their list, as happened to her once. So Angerame never misses anything. Day after day, she presses caseworkers who are slow to respond to her e-mails and questions why dozens of emergency housing vouchers go unused at a time. She even signed up for newsletters from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“I consider myself good at finding information, good at keeping track of things,” said Angerame, 40. “You have to be, or you won’t get anywhere.”
Twelve years

It was 2011 when Herman and Laura Rooks visited the Boston Housing Authority to put their name down for a Section 8 voucher to help pay for an apartment. But the wait has been so long that even that memory is hazy. They barely remember what the office looked like, or who they spoke to.

“It’s been a while,” Herman said. “Maybe that’s an understatement.”

The couple left an ill-kept Hyde Park apartment and have since found a home in Lower Mills, scratching together the rent each month. But how much longer they can survive there is uncertain. Laura makes $17 an hour as a court stenographer, and Herman brings in money from his disability benefit. Much of that money goes toward raising their 10-year-old grandson.
Last year, rent went up by $380 to $2,035. The management company quickly threatened the Rooks with eviction.

“We are getting old,” said Laura, 66. “We worry about our future.”

The majority of people on the wait lists are like the Rooks: older, disabled, or both. As of 2021, 43 percent of households on the BHA wait list are Black like Herman, according to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Many struggle to navigate the intricacies of such a complicated, haphazard system. There are families whose homes have burned down, women fleeing abuse, 18-year-olds adrift after being booted from home.

The Rooks are grateful for the efforts underway to bring affordable housing to people like them. COVID brought historic infusions of government money for emergency vouchers and rental assistance, and advocates are lobbying the Legislature now for $9 billion to improve public housing. A spokesperson for the BHA added to the sentiment in a statement: “If BHA had the resources to house everyone who needed our help, that’s exactly what we would do.”

Various agencies are working — albeit slowly — to make the application process easier. The Department of Housing and Community Development also launched a common, digital application for state-aided public housing and the Alternative Housing Voucher Program a few years ago.

But for people such as the Rooks, help is still hard to find, nearly as hard as housing. A few times, they called the BHA office to inquire about their place on the wait list, but even that is a time-consuming task. Herman often hears an assurance from a caseworker that only sparks disappointment, thinly veiled by hope.

“Soon,” he heard. “It’ll be soon.”
Cameron Rooks (left) set up a chessboard with his grandfather Herman Rooks (right) in their Dorchester apartment. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

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