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Opening Doors and Changing Lives

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Opening Doors and Changing Lives

Small changes in policy can make a big impact in the fight to end homelessness.

Unless you're a housing policy wonk, it's easy to lose interest when you read the words "HUD project-based subsidies" or "tenant selection plans," but small changes to these large federal programs can have an immediate and lasting impact on the lives of real people in our community. People like James McAtee.

A resident of the bay area for more than 50 years, Mr. McAtee is a retired veteran who

became homeless after an accident in 2015 left him with serious and permanent injuries. Up until last April, James was living at a local emergency homeless shelter, but thanks to SAHA's new tenant selection plan, he is a happy resident at Valdez Plaza Apartments.

Born and raised in Chicago, James lived for three years in North Carolina, where he was stationed at Marine Corps Camp Lejeune where he served as a Marine from 1953-1956. After his service ended, he briefly moved back to Chicago.

Like so many other Americans during the 60s, James came to visit a friend in Berkeley and fell in love with the weather, culture and opportunities. When his visit ended, he went back home, packed up his bags and moved to California.

James was an active member of the Berkeley community during the 60s and 70s. An entrepreneur, James started his own business supplying screen-printed tote bags to local bookstores, including bay area institutions: Cody's Books in Berkeley, and City Lights Books in San Francisco. He taught himself screen printing, and made all the bags by hand. He made a modest living, was his own boss, and supplemented his income with other odd jobs such as waiting tables and tending bar.

After work, you could often find him at Caffè Mediterraneo or 'The Med' as it is famously known. There he met a diverse crowd, and mingled with beat generation artists and activists in the Free Speech Movement. He's been a regular there the last 50 years. The Med is currently closed for renovations, but Mr. McAtee hopes to go back once they re-open.

In 2015, Mr. McAtee fell from a ladder and ended up with severe injuries that required physical therapy, and lifestyle adjustments. At 79, James was forced to move from his apartment in North Oakland because he could no longer climb the multiple flights of stairs.

Unable to afford rising rents, he went to stay with his one surviving sister in Florida, but after four months, he knew he needed to return home. 'I can't see myself living east of the Mississippi ever again,' James says, 'I hopped on a bus, and four days later I was back in Berkeley.'

James found a spot at a local emergency homeless shelter. He lived there for eight months before a case worker helped him find housing at SAHA's Valdez Plaza Apartments.

Mr. McAtee is no longer homeless thanks to HUD changes which provide housing agencies like SAHA the flexibility to tailor their tenant selection plans to meet the local needs of their communities.

In September of 2012, HUD launched a pilot of the program in 10 communities in the eastern US. They measured the implementation of a homeless preference, and the benefits to the community. Finding success, HUD authorized other organizations across the country to implement this preference at their buildings, and they developed the Opening Doors Through Multifamily Housing: Toolkit for Implementing a Homeless Preference. This toolkit provides affordable housing agencies like SAHA, the guidance they need to not only change their tenant selection plans, but how to implement partnerships with other agencies to establish and operate a centralized or coordinated assessment system.

According to HUD's website, 'This coordinated entry system provides an initial, comprehensive assessment of the needs of individuals and families for housing and services. In structuring a multifamily initiative, each community will need to adjust for its own particular

situation, but the ultimate goal should be to create a resource and referral system that is integrated into the broader system of coordinated intake, assessment, and housing placement.?

Chris Hess, Director of Resident Services says "we're the first organization in California (to our knowledge) that has implemented the Opening Doors program. By working with our local HUD field office, and local agencies, we've created a new tenant selection plan at Valdez Plaza that gives preference to homeless seniors and veterans in the community. The streets are no place for seniors, and homelessness is a life-threatening emergency for more of these vulnerable members of our community. Homelessness is increasing faster for seniors than other demographic groups, and the average age of a homeless person in Oakland is now over 50. SAHA is working hard to open our doors to homeless seniors and hoping other housing organizations will follow our lead to increase our positive impact in the community.?"

SAHA has plans to expand the Opening Doors homeless preference to four more senior properties in 2017. Mr. McAtee thinks that is a great thing. He says, "my home at Valdez Plaza Apartments is nicer than where I was living before my accident. The staff are helpful and nice. I'm not sure how I got so lucky. There are so many people waiting in shelters for homes.?"

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