

## **Participant Frequently Asked Questions:**

### **Does ACHA pay the security deposit?**

No. The security deposit is paid by the tenant.

### **When should I pay the security deposit?**

Many landlords will ask for the security deposit when you wish to rent their unit. This is not unusual. However, It is recommended that you receive the return policy in writing should you or the landlord decide not to rent the unit.

### **Who pays the utilities?**

The owner and tenant must agree who will be responsible for the payment of specific utilities. These responsibilities are outlined in the lease and contract.

### **How much money will ACHA pay for my home?**

The owner will determine how much rent to charge. This rent must be the same as the owner would charge an unassisted tenant and request that amount. ACHA will compare the rent requested to other similar units. This comparison, along with the inspection results and payment standards will determine what rent the ACHA will pay.

### **What is my portion of the rent?**

Your rent portion is affected by family income and the contract rent for the unit. In the first year of the contract, the tenant portion of between 30%-40% of the family's monthly adjusted income, depending on the rent amount. After the first year of the lease, the rent may exceed 40%, depending on the rent amount. However, any portion over the payment standard will be paid by the tenant and not the ACHA.

### **Why do I have to pay rent when I have a voucher?**

Housing Choice Voucher Program is a rental assistance program – not a free rent program.

### **When can I move in?**

You may begin your lease with your landlord the day the unit passes inspection. The Allegheny County Housing Authority begins contracts on the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month. If your unit passes inspection on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the month, the contract (and your lease) will begin on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month.

### **My unit hasn't passed inspection, but my landlord said I can move in.**

Please be aware ACHA will not pay subsidy on your behalf to the landlord until your unit passes inspection and it is under contract. If you move in before this time period, the ACHA **will not** pay any portion of your rent and your landlord may be able to charge you the full amount of rent.

### **How is income verified?**

All income, benefits and allowance must be verified with documentation. ACHA staff must obtain written documentation from independent third party sources. In addition, the ACHA will use the HUD Enterprise Income Verification module that matches social security numbers with employment records. If unreported income is found, this can result in termination of assistance. The family will be required to repay ACHA for any overpaid assistance.

**When should I report changes in income or household?**

All changes must be reported immediately and must be reported in writing. Failure to report or under reporting income could jeopardize your housing assistance. Please email any changes to [s8tenants@achsng.com](mailto:s8tenants@achsng.com).

**I have a complaint with my current landlord. Who can I contact?**

As a tenant, your lease is with your landlord or an owner of the property. ACHA is not a party to your lease. You and your landlord should try and work out any problems you may have. If your landlord does not make repairs in a timely manner after you have notified him or her, you may contact your Housing Counselor for a complaint inspection. All requests for complaint inspections must be submitted in writing.

**How do I qualify for a utility check?**

Whether or not a family receives a utility allowance check is determined by family income and the utilities for which the family is responsible. The tenant total payment (approximately 30% of their monthly adjusted income) includes the rent portion and utilities. If the tenant's rent amount is less than the utility allowance for the unit, the family will receive the difference in a utility check.

The utility allowance is based on the average cost of utilities and the size of the unit. Allowances are not based upon an individual family's actual energy consumption.

**What do I do if I want to move and use my rental assistance in another unit?**

ACHA must receive a copy of the notice you have given your landlord/owner of the unit you are currently residing in. You must give a minimum of a sixty (60) day notice to the landlord and the notice must state your intention to move if you are within 60 days of your recertification date. If you are not, you must obtain a mutual rescission from your landlord allowing you to move. You are not permitted to move in the first year of the lease. Once your move is approved you will be scheduled for a moving briefing and receive your voucher, Request for Tenancy Approval (RFTA) and a briefing packet for the new unit. Please note that you will not receive a voucher without attending the moving briefing.

**Why is an annual re-certification necessary?**

ACHA is required by federal regulation to review each family's income and family size at least once per year. This is done to insure the right amount of rent is being paid based on actual income and the voucher is the right size for the family.

**What happens during the re-certification?**

The family will receive an annual recertification packet from his/her Housing Counselor. An application will be completed and all paperwork that needs to be signed and returned to ACHA. After the re-certification is complete, the family and the landlord will be sent a new rent letter advising of the tenant portion and the Housing Assistance Payment.

**My income has changed. What do I do?**

As stated above, all income changes must be made in writing immediately. If your income has decreased, your new rent will be effective the following month after you have reported the change in writing. For example: you lost your job in June, but did not send the written change until August. Your rent will be decreased for September. It is extremely important that you report any changes in a timely manner.

**What are Housing Quality Standards?**

Housing Quality Standards (HQS) are the HUD minimum quality standards for housing assisted under the rental assistance program. HQS have been developed for program use nationwide and help to ensure your home will be safe, decent and sanitary. These standards are applied by the Housing Inspector during the inspection.

**Are inspections required?**

Yes. Inspections will be completed prior to the unit being placed under Housing Assistance Payment contract and bi-annually. A special inspection may be requested by tenants or landlords under different circumstances.

**Do I have to be present when the inspection occurs?**

No. There must be a responsible adult (age 18 or over) present to let the inspector into the unit. We advise that tenants and/or landlords be present for inspections. This is an opportunity for you to find out first hand why the unit did not pass inspection.

**I was not at home for my inspection – how can I reschedule?**

You may reschedule your inspection by contacting the Inspector on the appointment letter. If you miss an inspection, you may jeopardize your rental assistance, so you must contact the Inspections Department immediately.

If the first inspection is missed, the unit will automatically be rescheduled for a second inspection within the next 30 days. If a second appointment is missed, the family will be recommended for termination of assistance. In addition, the HAP and utility allowance (UAP), if received, will be placed on hold and the check will not be released until an inspection is done.

**What date will my unit be inspected and when will the Inspector arrive?**

For annual inspections, appointments are generally scheduled two (2) weeks in advance. Due to the large size of Allegheny County, inspections can be conducted between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. It is not possible to give an exact time.

**Why was my rent or unit abated?**

The ACHA is required to inspect units at least bi-annually. Rent is abated (stopped) when the repairs are not completed by the re-inspection deadline date. The unit will be taken out of abatement if it passes inspection and payments will resume the day after the unit passes inspection.

**Who should I report maintenance problems to?**

Maintenance problems should be reported to the landlord or property manager in writing. If the problem is not corrected in a prompt or satisfactory manner, the problem should be reported to the ACHA in writing for possible action.

**My Landlord wants me to pay more than my rental portion. Can the tenant pay extra rent to make up the amount the Landlord wants?**

No. The ACHA determines the tenant's portion of the rent. The owner, cannot under any circumstances, charge or accept additional payments from the family for their share of the rent that has not been approved by ACHA. If you, as the tenant, agree to pay more than your portion of the rent, it is considered a "side payment". This is not permitted and you may lose your assistance.

### **What should I expect from my landlord?**

Landlords have the same rights and responsibilities in the Housing Choice Voucher Program as they have with any open market renter, including:

- Maintain the property in good condition
- Complete all necessary repairs within a reasonable amount of time upon request by the Housing Authority or tenant, including all 24 hour emergency items. The amount of time that is considered reasonable depends upon the nature of the problem.
- Set reasonable rules about the use of the unit and common areas
- Collect appropriate security deposit as directed under the program and use it only in accordance with state and local law
- Comply with equal housing opportunity requirements
- Enforce tenant obligations under the terms of your lease
- Take action through the court system to evict a tenant when they violate the lease

### **What should my landlord expect from me as a Housing Choice Voucher tenant?**

- Pay your portion of the rent on time
- Keep the unit clean
- Maintain exterior of residence and yard
- Avoid illegal activities by household members and guests
- Allow ACHA Inspectors access to the unit to conduct HQS inspections
- Permit landlord and designated repairmen access to the unit for repairs
- Avoid damage to the property by household members and guests
- Refrain from disturbing neighbors
- Allow only those occupants on the lease to reside in the unit
- Comply with terms and conditions of the dwelling lease and tenancy addendum

### **What are tenant HQS responsibilities in the unit?**

Practice good housekeeping habits in your home. Keep the home in a clean, safe and orderly condition. Do not damage the property. Cut the grass, hedges, shrubbery and maintain the exterior of the property. Let the property manager or landlord know as soon as possible when maintenance or repair work is needed.

### **Can I lose my rental assistance?**

There are a number of ways families can lose their rental assistance. Here is a *partial* list of typical reasons that are usually sufficient to cause ACHA to stop rental assistance to a family.

- Not complying with the terms of the Section 8 program family obligations.
- Any family member who has committed fraud, bribery or any other corrupt or criminal act in connection with any federal housing program
- Vacating the housing unit without proper notice
- Allowing unauthorized persons to live in the housing unit
- Failing to report or under reporting changes in income or provide information provided by the ACHA for re-certification of the family's continued eligibility for rental assistance
- Any family member residing in the unit that is involved in drug-related or criminal activities
- Serious or repeated lease violations

**I received a termination of assistance notice. What can I do?**

A family is entitled to an informal hearing in most circumstances of termination. Your notice of termination will advise if you are entitled to a hearing. You must return the bottom portion of the termination notice within ten (10) days in order to qualify for a hearing. If you do not return the bottom portion of the hearing request within the time frame specified, you will forfeit the right to a hearing and your assistance will be terminated.

**My lease is up and I want to move. How do I go about doing that?**

Sixty (60) days prior to your lease expiration, you must advise the landlord, in writing, that you want to move. A copy of this notice to vacate must be submitted to your Housing Counselor. Your Housing Counselor will submit your name for a moving briefing. You will receive your voucher at the moving briefing along with the other paperwork to find a new unit.

**I don't really like the home or neighborhood I moved into. Can I move again?**

You must live in your home for the first year of a lease. After the one year lease term has been satisfied you will be able to move.

**I want to move out of Allegheny County Housing Authority's jurisdiction. Can I?**

Yes. A Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher holder may take the voucher anywhere in the United States where a Public Housing Authority administers a tenant-based voucher program. This process is called portability.

In order to move, you must do so at the end of your lease with a proper 60-day notice to your current landlord and:

- Notify your Housing Counselor that you wish to move to another state.
- Have a place in mind and preferably have the name of a Housing Authority in that area that administers the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program.

Then ACHA will send a portability package to the receiving Housing Agency, which would include a new 60-day Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher. At this time, you should be in the jurisdiction of the receiving Housing Agency and must make an appointment with them to determine eligibility in their area and to begin the process according to their standards.

**NOTE:** Participants must be in good standing with the PHA and Landlord to utilize portability.

**What is a reasonable accommodation? Can I get one?**

Sometimes people with disabilities may need a reasonable accommodation in order to take full advantage of the Allegheny County Housing Authority housing programs and related services.

A reasonable accommodation is a change, adaptation, or modification to the ACHA's rules, policies, practices or services which are necessary to provide a qualified individual with a handicap or disability an equal opportunity to participate fully in services, programs or activities provided by the ACHA.

Your request should be made to your Housing Counselor. Requests can also be made at any time to the Allegheny County Housing Authority's Program Accessibility Administrator, Kate Vitek. A request may be made either orally or in writing. A request can also be made on behalf of the individual by a family member or other agent.

**What if I have an individual need?**

Please tell us if you need assistance of any kind to access our services. If you need an interpreter or a translator, tell us, and we will provide one for you.

**I have a specific question that isn't answered here. Where do I get the answer?**

If your question isn't answered in this list, please email your question(s) to: [S8tenants@achsng.com](mailto:S8tenants@achsng.com). You will receive an answer via email.