



Racial bias claim halts Section 8 program

Christina Villacorte | June 21, 2011

Facing a lawsuit alleging racism, county officials have temporarily stopped a program that was allegedly targeting Antelope Valley minorities on public housing assistance by subjecting them to extra inspections and police harassment.

The county imposed a 90-day moratorium on the program last week, so that the allegations of racism could be investigated, and the Board of Supervisors upheld that decision Tuesday.

Officials in Palmdale and Lancaster acknowledged they were getting tough on recipients of Section 8 public housing assistance, but denied it was racially motivated. Instead, they said, it was an effort to root out fraud and reduce crime.

Lancaster Mayor Rex Parris predicted that ending the program will lead to an increase in crime, including rape and murder.

"I don't know how many people are going to be victimized but I know for a fact there will be," he said. "There will be children killed, there will be people murdered, women raped, because now we're not allowed to do something we know that works."

But Maria Palomares, an attorney with Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County, said the moratorium is a "great first step toward making the community a welcoming community."

Her organization is part of a group that sued the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale on June 7 over aggressive "compliance checks" which supporters said were aimed at rooting out fraud in the use of Section 8 vouchers, but which critics said was intended to intimidate and drive out minorities.

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-Maria Palomares
Neighborhood Legal Services

"We heard stories over and over and over again about how sheriffs would show up with the investigators (from the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles) - 10 officers with guns drawn," Palomares said.

Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford denied having an ulterior motive for ordering the compliance checks.

"We are not a community of racists," he told the board. "We believe that this program is accomplishing several goals in our community, certainly one of compliance with the rules."

HACoLA Executive Director Sean Rogan testified that even with the moratorium in place, law enforcement would not be hampered.

"If it's a policing matter, (deputies) will be able to investigate the facts of that policing matter," Rogan said. "If a household, whether it be Section 8 or non-Section 8, for example, is suspected of having guns or drugs, the police can investigate that as they would any matter."

There are more than 20,000 families receiving Section 8 vouchers in Los Angeles County, and about 3,500 of them - almost 17 percent - are in Lancaster and Palmdale. Of those Antelope Valley recipients, 86 percent are African-American or Latino.

Supervisor Michael Antonovich defended the need for enforcement of Section 8 rules.

"Individuals who cheat the system are not only ripping off the taxpayer, they are depriving the needy, the disabled and the elderly a place in the program," he added. "The Section 8 program wait list is currently closed and there is a backlog of some 10,000 deserving individuals."

Antonovich said of the 126 Section 8 vouchers that investigators recommended for termination in the past year, 39 were for narcotics violations; 37 for unauthorized tenants; 38 for criminal activity; 26 for unreported income; three for providing false information; and one for a nuisance violation.

Sheldon Carter, one of dozens of Antelope Valley residents bused in to testify before the board, said he was tired of his taxpayer money being abused by people fraudulently benefiting from Section 8.

"This is not a racial issue," said Carter, who is African-American. "It is a color issue. The color is green and it's my dollars."

But several Section 8 recipients, who testified remotely from the Lancaster library, said they did not deserve to be "harassed."

Bobby Collins, an African-American woman, said her home was raided, and members of her family were falsely accused of crimes so they could be disqualified from Section 8.

"They put so many false accusations in the paper about us, (such as) I stole cars, I stole jewelry, I robbed this, I did that," Collins said. "All of those was lies ... You put me through hell."