

## Housing Choice Voucher Recipients Concentrated in 27834 Zip Code

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The Housing Choice Voucher Program operated by the Greenville Housing Authority was put into place through the Quality Work Release Act of 1999. Since then, the program has grown to assist over 700 low-income families find and pay for housing.

Ideally, these participants would be dispersed evenly through out the Greenville area, but in reality, over 600 of the 723 families receiving the voucher are clustered into the 27834 zip code, which is located in the northwestern area of Greenville.

According to Mulatu Wubneh, East Carolina University's chair of the Department of Planning who is an expert in poverty, this clustering is not a good idea, and is a result of history. "During the '60s, Greenville went through a downtown revitalization program that resulted in the displacement of a number of people from the Tar River to the areas where these housing recipients are living today. The property was cheap and is located away from the more developed areas of today," he said.

Even though the clustering of housing voucher recipients into one zip code isn't a good idea, Michael Best of the Greenville Housing Authority insists that there is nothing his department can do about it.

"We do not have the ability to make people go to a certain area. The concentration is because people choose to live in those areas. We can't make people sign leases in certain areas, and as long as the place meets housing standards, the participants can live anywhere they want," he commented.

When people are granted a voucher, they are given a list of landlords who have previously participated in the program, as well as a list of landlords who have inquired about the program. It is up to the recipient to meet with landlords and view possible apartments or homes, and discuss and sign the lease when they find a home that meets their needs. If the rent is more than the amount they have been granted with their voucher, the participant must pay the remaining balance.

According to the Greenville Housing Authority's Web site, the main perk of this program is the flexibility that comes with receiving the voucher. The web site states that families have a variety of houses and neighborhoods to choose from, and applicants may also choose to live in a unit that is larger than allowed through the Section 8 program.

Although this sounds like a great advantage to recipients, a lot of times that flexibility isn't so. "I had a lot of trouble finding a place to live in the better neighborhoods of Greenville. Most of the time the landlord required my income to be double or triple the rent every month, and in other places it was just too expensive for me to afford," Stacey Daniels, who has been receiving the voucher since 2003, said.

Michael Best also attributes the unequal dispersion to student housing landlords. In most cases, these landlords can get more money charging per student for each room in one apartment, as opposed to charging one price for a family to live in that same place.

There are many other stipulations that recipients may encounter when looking for housing, including credit checks or application fees, but Best said that the housing authority is available to assist recipients with those problems.

There are two major zip codes in Greenville: 27834 and 27858. As of 2000, the population of the 27834 zip code was 43,549, consisting of 54 percent African-Americans and 41 percent whites. The 27858 area has a population of 45,015, made up of 82 percent whites and 14 percent African-Americans.

According to factfinder.com and the U.S. Census Bureau, in the 27834 area, where most voucher recipients are residing, the median family income in 1999 dollars is \$34,659, and nearly 20 percent of families are below the poverty level.

These statistics drastically improve when looking at the 27858 zip code. In an area that according to neighborhoodlink.com consists of “mostly white young singles” and wealthier neighborhoods, the median family income in 1999 dollars is \$59,375, with only 7.8 percent of families living below the poverty line.

These comparisons make sense when considering that more than 80 percent of voucher recipients live in an area that is significantly poorer than its neighboring zip code.

Although the Housing Voucher Program isn’t equally dispersed throughout Greenville, it not only helps those in need, but also helps landlords catch a break during the slow economy.

“We like the program because it is guaranteed rent from the housing authority, and we don’t have to worry about if the person is going to pay and having to track them down. All of the clients that we accept vouchers from take care of their property, and it has been an overall positive experience for all of us,” said Margaret Fortescue of Breckenridge Court Apartments, which rents out 29 units to voucher recipients.

The Greenville Housing Authority has experienced both budget cuts and an increasing need for more vouchers to distribute to those in poverty. It typically takes a person on the waiting list two years to actually receive the voucher. Despite the growing need for the vouchers in an economy that continuously experiences budget cuts, the Housing Voucher Program is helping many in need to get on their feet again.

“This is a good program. It’s helping a lot of folks. With any program you will have problems, but overall it’s a great program that acts as a stepping stone for people to have a better life,” Best said.