

Housing director heals relationship with Antioch

By Hilary Costa **Contra Costa Times**

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Joseph Villarreal prefers a stark work space. Just a couple pieces of paper adorn the wide, white walls of his Martinez office, tacked up seemingly as afterthoughts.

The director of the Housing Authority of the County of Contra Costa considers wall art a sort of jinx the last time he decorated an office, he wound up leaving the job within months.

Keep the walls blank, Antioch officials would plead.

Under Villarreal's leadership, the city's relationship with the housing authority — which in recent history could only be described as tumultuous — is on the mend

And while Antioch continues to deal with issues related to the agency and its subsidized housing program, officials say Villarreal, 45, has bolstered Antioch's confidence in the housing authority's ability to manage the growing number of Antioch households in the federal Section 8 housing voucher program.

"When I first came here, the volume was louder in Antioch," Villarreal said. "The volume isn't as loud anymore."

According to housing authority records, the number of official complaints about Antioch Section 8 rentals has gone from 330 in 2007, to 118 in 2008 and 31 through mid-August this year.

Villarreal came to Contra Costa in June 2007 after more than six years with the Oakland Housing Authority, where he oversaw the city's Section 8 program. Today he inhabits the same position and office — that his late father, Perfecto Villarreal, did when he ran the Contra Costa authority from 1982 to 1992.

"Joseph came on board and worked aggressively on building relationships within the Antioch community," county Supervisor Federal Glover said.

Antioch's chief complaint under Villarreal's predecessor, Rudy Tamayo: Problems with Antioch Section 8 households, ranging from illegal activity to unkempt landscaping, went largely unaddressed by the housing authority, which administers the federal program locally.

Section 8 provides rent assistance to low-income families, the elderly and the disabled in the form of vouchers used to rent homes on the open market.

Loud complaints

In 2007, a federal audit found that Contra Costa County had "significant weaknesses" in its Section 8 program, kept shoddy records, and needed tighter verification policies to ensure that voucher recipients were eligible.

In the year leading up to that report, complaints about Section 8 were loudest in Antioch, where city leaders battled with the county for improvements. During a six-month period in 2006, nearly twothirds of Antioch properties with noise, unkempt yards, criminal activity and other complaints were Section 8 rentals, the Antioch Police Department reported.

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"We didn't feel the housing authority had been responsive to concerns in the city," Antioch City Manager Jim Jakel said.

The housing authority now issues 6,278 Section 8 vouchers. Currently, 1,571 of those are being used in Antioch, a city of 102,000 people. That's up from 1,500 reported in late 2007. It's also the highest of the cities the agency oversees.

Concord, with a population of 121,000, has 1,059 Section 8 households. Pittsburg and Richmond have city-run housing authorities.

Upon his hire, Villarreal took steps to immediately address the perceptions and reality of the problems in Antioch. He met early on with city officials and instituted monthly meetings between the agency and the Police Department.

"It wasn't so much 'get along with Antioch, that's the job'; it was 'solve some of the problems,""%" Villarreal said.

Added oversight

In 2008, the housing authority extended its criminal background checks for voucher applicants from one year to five. A fraud investigator from the Costra County District Attorney's Office now works part time looking into reports of illegal activity.

Antioch police Chief Jim Hyde declined to comment for this story, citing ongoing litigation. The city is defending itself in a federal class-action civil rights lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, asserted that police have discriminated against African-American Section 8 tenants.

Publicly, however, Hyde has praised Villarreal and Bruce Smargiasso, who was brought on in October 2007 specifically to oversee the Section 8 program

 an added level of oversight that Jakel lauded as key.

On another front, the housing authority began holding landlord workshops in Antioch. The city's boom years of cheap housing proved tempting for many mom-and-pop investors. These amateur landlords took on the guaranteed income of government-subsidized rent checks but lacked experience, Villarreal said.

"They don't understand that they're running a business," Villarreal said. "They think the (Section 8) program runs their rental."

Numbers game

That's one dynamic that resulted in Antioch becoming such a focus for the housing authority, whose purview also extends over government-run and subsidized housing in 29 other cities and unincorporated regions.

It's also a numbers game, Smargiasso said.

"Antioch is the biggest population of my clients, so it's more than likely I'm going to get a larger number (of complaints)," he said. "But that doesn't mean the per-unit complaints (are higher)."

Other Contra Costa cities with relatively high numbers of Section 8 households are San Pablo, with 798, and Brentwood, with 407.

By contrast, the more affluent cities of Walnut Creek, San Ramon and Lafayette have 279, 120 and 45 Section 8 households, respectively.

Cities whose housing is more affordable have more Section 8 residents because a dollar goes further there, Villarreal said.

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Case in point: Craigslist advertises a 1,700-squarefoot, four-bedroom house in Antioch renting for \$1,680 a month. A 900-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment in Walnut Creek fetches \$1,675.

"Section 8 families go where everyone else goes," Villarreal said.

In Antioch, complaints about Section 8 have simmered down. Public meetings are no longer overrun by angry residents demanding change.

"I think the effort we made a couple years back helped. We made a lot of noise about it," said Antioch Mayor Jim Davis, also calling Villarreal a "vast improvement" over Tamayo.

Still, Davis won't be satisfied until Antioch forms its own agency like Pittsburg and Richmond.

"It only makes sense," he said.

Reach Hilary Costa at 925-779-7166.

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Jose Carlos Fajardo/Staff Joseph Villarreal has been with the Housing Authority of the County of Contra Costa since June 2007.

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