

Thousands line up for aid

Police shut down housing voucher distribution in Detroit suburb

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In a sign of the deep social crisis in the United States, thousands of people gathered Saturday morning to receive applications for Section 8 housing from the Taylor Human Services Center in suburban Detroit. Officials running the event shut it down after the crowd rushed to get the applications.

Estimates of the crowd size ranged up to 5,000, far more than anticipated. Many were homeless, disabled or elderly. There were pregnant women and mothers with small children. Many people had been waiting overnight to be first in line to get the government vouchers that help low income people pay the cost of housing. By Saturday morning the line stretched for more than a mile.

When the doors finally opened reports indicate there was a rush, accompanied by pushing and shoving. Police officers on the scene called for backup. There was reportedly a request put in for riot police. Stunned event organizers cancelled the distribution, turning out the lights. This further angered the crowd, which police eventually dispersed. Four people were arrested for disorderly conduct.

Taylor is a multi-ethnic working class area that has been devastated by the collapse of the Michigan economy. The huge turnout points to widespread social distress, extending far beyond the city of Detroit. It exposes the lie advanced by the Obama administration that there is an economic recovery taking place. In fact millions of people are living in destitution or near destitution.

Rhianna Rodriguez, one of those seeking assistance, told reporters for a local news channel, “It was heartbreaking... It shows what a desperate need there is. They were here since yesterday afternoon around five

or six o’clock.

“There was a lady here. She had an oxygen tank, was elderly. When police told everyone they had to go home, she was crying. It broke my heart.”

A Fox News 2 reporter said, “We saw one police officer pick up a baby and move it away from the crowd. When the mother complained, she got arrested.”

“She was moving. We were moving. She just wasn’t moving fast enough for them, so they grabbed her up,” said another person.

Local officials were clearly unprepared for the turnout. There were reportedly only 1,000 applications to be distributed for a crowd numbering many times that. A Taylor human services official said that they had conducted four other similar distributions over the course of the past 12 years and never had a response approaching that of Saturday.

Section 8 housing vouchers are issued to low-income families, the elderly and disabled to assist with housing costs. They are administered by local public housing agencies, which give a subsidy to landlords on behalf of families enrolled in the program. Recipients are then responsible for paying the difference between the actual rent and the amount of the subsidy. Since the number of applicants for vouchers normally exceeds the number available, there are usually long waiting lists.

The scene in Taylor, reminiscent of the Great Depression, far from being an exception, is more and more the norm as poverty increases and meager government assistance is cut back.

In 2009 some 50,000 people in Detroit flooded the Cobo Hall convention center seeking housing assistance and help paying utility bills. Many slept on the streets overnight to be first in line. In 2010, 30,000

turned out to a similar event in Atlanta, Georgia. Police used mace this past December against a crowd of 2,000 in Columbus, Ohio who had gathered for applications to a single apartment complex.

Federal rental assistance reaches only a small fraction of those in need. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank, some 10 million low-income households in the US pay more than 50 percent of their monthly income to cover housing costs. The median income of these households is \$1,150 and median housing costs are \$1,010, leaving only \$140 to pay other expenses. When housing costs consume more than 50 percent of income households are at greater risk for becoming homeless.

About 308,000 households in Michigan pay more than 50 percent of their monthly cash income for housing, yet federal rental assistance programs reached only 146,100 of these low-income households.

Michigan's unemployment rate stands at 8.9 percent, well above the national average of 7.7 percent. The state has the fastest growing poverty rate in the United States. According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, poverty has increased by 66 percent in Michigan since 2001. The state's median income fell by 20 percent during that period. Almost 1 in 4 children in the state now live in poverty. The child poverty rate in Detroit, the poorest big city in America, stands at 57.3 percent.

There has also been a sharp rise in poverty in the Detroit suburbs. According to Forgotten Harvest's Poverty in Southeast Michigan report, between 2000 and 2010 poverty in the Detroit suburbs increased by 96.4 percent, and the suburbs' share of the poor population in the metropolitan area rose from 45 to 59.7 percent.

These conditions are being exacerbated by a continuing assault on the most vulnerable layers of the population. The state of Michigan recently cut the maximum period for receiving unemployment benefits from 26 weeks to 20 weeks. This has been followed by sharp cuts in cash welfare assistance. The Republican administration of Governor Rick Snyder recently signed legislation eliminating exemptions from the federal 60-month limit on receiving welfare payments. This follows the passage of a law by the previous Democratic administration in 2007 imposing a 48-month state time limit.

There has already been a dramatic fall in welfare cases. In September 2011, just before the time limits took effect, there were 80,000 receiving cash assistance. By June 2012 that number had fallen to just 55,000.

A family of three must earn less than \$10,000 a year to qualify for any assistance, far below the official poverty level of \$18,106 in 2011. Meanwhile, the average household grant has dropped from \$552 a month to just \$400 a month or \$4,800 a year.

Extreme levels of social distress throughout the US will only intensify over the coming year, as the political establishment in Washington, led by the Obama administration, focuses its attention on slashing health care, pensions and all social programs that benefit the working class.



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