

# **New cooperative program helps families find self-sufficiency**

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**STAMFORD --** A new cooperative program between Charter Oak Communities -- the city's housing authority -- and Family Centers will give Stamford families receiving federal Section 8 benefits new ways to lead increasingly independent lives.

Entitled the Stamford Family Self-Sufficiency Program, the initiative is paid for by money from a federal Housing and Urban Development grant.

That grant was obtained by Charter Oak Communities, and will be administered by Greenwich-based Family Centers.

The five-year program allows Family Centers to provide support aimed at self-sufficiency at housing complexes run by Charter Oak and at other locations around the city. Services offered include counseling, goal-planning, job-skills training, life skills and family support.

"We're extremely pleased to build upon our relationship Charter Oak Communities to offer this program, which will improve the lives of local families," said Donna Spellman, director of self-sufficiency and independent living at Family Centers. "Because we're able to offer our services anywhere in the community, we're able to work with each resident on an individual basis to identify their goals and offer support as they move toward a greater sense of self-sufficiency."

According to [www.ct.gov/dss](http://www.ct.gov/dss), Section 8 is a housing-choice voucher program to assist very low-income families in affording decent, safe and sanitary housing in the private market.

Also federally funded through HUD, Section 8 vouchers are administered locally by more than 40 public-housing agencies. Eligibility is determined by a combination of annual household gross income, and the housing agencies definition of family.

Jessica Herlihy, program coordinator for family self-sufficiency at Family Centers, said all housing authorities have the option to develop programs that lead families to independent living.

"Charter Oak (started a self-sufficiency program), and they reached out to us," Herlihy said. "The whole point is to offer services clients need to gain self-sufficiency. Each housing program has Section 8 qualifications, but the program is very broad. Any goals a family might have to gain self-sufficiency, I can help them with those. Those include appropriate child care, job training, education, and cars to get a better job. As long as the goals work toward self-sufficiency, we can help them achieve those goals."

To encourage that long-term independence, the program has established special savings accounts for the program's participants, according to Bill Brucker, communications director for Family Centers.

Similar to a 401k savings plan, families have the option of contributing to these accounts to save for approved self-sufficiency related endeavors like home ownership, vehicle payments, education and tuition fees, childcare, and similar investments.

"Rather than raising the cost of rent when a family's economic situation improves, a percentage of each family's income will be put into an escrow account," said Vincent Tufo, executive director of Charter Oak. "We're in the business of encouraging independent living, and money saved into these accounts will be a wonderful reward for families that complete the program."

Brucker elaborated on some of the uses of that saved money.

"We help people work toward housing and jobs," Brucker said. "If there's an increase in rent, Charter Oak takes the difference and puts it in an account for education costs, work clothes, or to save for a car. Also as part of the savings incentive, if the (program participant) earns an increase in salary or pay, they can put some of that additional money in a Charter Oak savings account."

Both Herlihy and Brucker called Tufo a "visionary behind this housing transformation."

"This came about after the Fairfield Court revitalization, and this program is a way of incorporating resident services into new and existing housing programs," Tufo said. "These residents many times are disconnected from the services they need most. This connectivity is crucial so residents can take advantage of all the services they need."