

Escape to Freedom: How Affordable Housing Programs Made a Difference in My Life
An interview with Rhonda Hue, Compliance Manager, Seattle Housing Authority

Rhonda Hue – Compliance Manager, Seattle Housing Authority, and Vice President of the Affordable Housing Management Association of Washington, shares her life story on the importance of our affordable housing programs in this article. It is a personal story, written in Rhonda’s own words.



My Name is Rhonda Hue.

I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and lived in the lower 9th ward. My siblings and I grew up in a low-income household and attended public school. At the age of 38, I married my abuser (my second husband) and lived a life of physical and mental abuse.

I left my husband in April of 2001. I contacted the local welfare office in Assumption Parish where I signed up for food stamps and medical assistance on Highway 308 in Napoleonville, La. Two weeks later, I received a notice to attend an appointment to get assistance for housing.

I had no idea how this would change my life!

I attended this appointment in May 2001 and was told I was eligible for a section 8 voucher for housing.

I did not know at the time what it meant or how I qualified but I knew it would allow for me to obtain housing. I’ll never forget the name of the staff person who assisted me - Ms. Jackie LeBlanc. She told me that I needed to find a place to live that took Section 8. I heard of Section 8, but had no idea how it worked. I started looking in the newspaper and calling the rental ads. No one took a Section 8 vouchers. I was confused and wondered why...

I went back to the office and explained that I was having a hard time finding landlords who would take the voucher. She explained that I could use this voucher anywhere and not just in Assumption Parish. My sister had just moved to Bellingham, Washington - so I thought this would be a good place to start a new life for me and my children. My sister paid for an airline ticket for me to visit her and see if I could move there. She had called the Bellingham Housing Authority and found there were many places that would take my voucher.

I felt there was hope.

I flew out to Bellingham in the beginning of June and visited several apartments. I made a decision to lease an apartment at the Regency Park Apartments. They were taking Section 8 applicants and the apartment complex had been financed by a Federal tax credit program. Little did I know that I had hit the jackpot. I completed the paperwork for the apartments, found that I was eligible for housing and my sister put down a holding deposit of \$200. I contacted the Bellingham Housing Authority and asked a lot of questions. I was told to contact them when I moved to Bellingham.

I flew backed to New Orleans and planned our escape from the continuing mental abuse, threats and my own fear for my family's safety. My family donated \$300 for the trip to cover gas and expenses. I contacted the domestic violence (DV) office - with the urging of Ms. LeBlanc, and learned that I could be helped along the route to Washington. I had no idea. So, I contacted the DV office, planned my driving schedule to Washington and they called several cities for me to plan my trip. It was amazing the help I received.

We left on Thursday, June 28th. The first night we stayed at the YWCA in Shreveport. There we received supper and breakfast, a place to stay for the night and a gift card of \$25 for gas. We left the next morning and headed for our next city...Oklahoma City. We arrived at the next destination early afternoon on Friday, June 29th and we were able to visit the memorial honoring the victims of the bombing of the Federal building. The kids enjoyed seeing this historic place and sitting in the chairs set up for the childcare memorial. This DV shelter was much nicer and had an area for the kids to enjoy computer games. We left the next morning with fresh fruit and sandwiches along with two gift cards for gas.

On Saturday, June 30th, we had a short ride due to all of us being grumpy and tired so we stayed near the Colorado border in Kansas, instead of Pueblo, Co. I had to call collect and change our plans. It worked out. I don't recall the details except we were able to sit in a back yard at the DV shelter/house and for the first time in my children's lives, they saw fireflies. We had such an awesome time watching them and we were treated to a home-cooked meal.

The next morning was Sunday, July 1st and we left bright and early. Plenty of food, some new clothes, cash money for gas, and toys for the kids to enjoy on the road. We made it to Casper Wyoming but we had a scare along the way. We filled up for gas somewhere in Colorado after we left the shelter and as we neared Cheyenne, Wyoming I felt we should stop, stretch our legs and get a fill up.

I had a little over ¼ of gas left in the tank. The line was long and I felt we could get gas at the next stop. I was on a time schedule to make it to the next DV shelter before 8 pm when they closed the doors. Little did we know that there would be NOTHING between Cheyenne and Casper. Half way I realized that we were in the middle of nowhere and that my tank was getting lower and lower. I felt panic setting in and I rarely saw any cars. I didn't know how I would take care of my kids or how far to the next gas station. Reading the map it appeared that Casper was getting closer but would we have enough gas? I don't know how we made it but we arrived in Casper on fumes and with 3 minutes to spare. What a great place! It was an old home and you did not even know it was a DV shelter. We had a late supper and tumbled into bed....exhausted.

The next morning, Monday, July 2nd we got up and prepared for our trip to Missoula, Montana. We were given food and a gas credit at a nearby gas station for a fill up. We arrived late into Missoula and it was a very boring and long drive. The kids were fighting from being in the truck for days and they were tired of the drive. It was so hot outside along the trip too. I was so exhausted and slept past my planned time to leave the next morning. I knew I could never make it to Bellingham the next day so I called the DV shelter in Bellingham and talked with Molly, my new caseworker.

She set us up in Ellensburg in a motel that took a voucher from the local DV office. The motel had a pool and we spent the late afternoon enjoying it. We also received a food voucher to a local diner for supper and breakfast. Early the next morning, July 4th, we headed out on our final journey. We past an early 4th of July parade as we weaved ourselves to Hwy 2. We stopped and picked up several containers of raspberries along the side of the road. At about 1 pm, we arrived into Bellingham! We made it. It was July 4th and we celebrated our own version of “Independence Day.”

We drove to my sister’s apartment and then we called Molly. She came out to interview us and sign the confidentially paperwork. It was a tough moment when she found out that my son was 16 days from being 13 years old. They had a rule about men and young males over 13 years old. I begged and pleaded that I would make sure he stayed close to me and not disturb the other families. The DV shelter in Bellingham was located in a neighborhood that was secretive. We all knew we could not disclose the location or even tell my sister. Molly escorted me and the kids to our new home.

The house was wonderful. We had our own room with a shared bathroom; and a huge kitchen with more food than we ever seen, and even a place for the kids to play. It was heaven. Once we received permission to attend the fireworks display (staying out past dark was against the rules), we left and headed to downtown Bellingham to attend the 4th of July celebration with my sister.

The next day I headed to Bellingham Housing Authority. I was disappointed that I had to make an appointment with my caseworker Maria. It was set for two week later. We stayed at the shelter and enjoyed every moment. I started looking for a job, signed up for TANF, received medical cards for my kids, and starting contacting resources for supplies. Two weeks later I met Maria. She explained that it would take another week or so to port in and then I would have to do an inspection of the apartment.

Meanwhile, the manager at the leasing office was getting nervous because I was supposed to take the unit the second week of July. It was a three-bedroom unit and she could not hold it too much longer. The DV shelter had a time limit of two weeks but extended it to meet the housing authority schedule. We played the waiting game. On or around July 28th, we moved into our new four-bedroom apartment. The kids and I loved the shelter and didn’t want to leave but it was so nice to finally have a place of our own.

We did not have to pay any rent for the first year and received an UA each month. I continued receiving TANF and was able to start using resources to obtain furniture, cooking supplies,

clothing, and other household items. A few weeks after I moved in to the apartments, I saw an ad for a housekeeper at the leasing office. I applied and was offered the job. I started off at \$8.00 an hour cleaning and turning units. I worked as much as they allowed me to, and tried to exceed my employer's expectations.

Several weeks later, the property manager needed someone to work the weekends...I volunteered. My kids needed school supplies and clothing and shoes for school. I did such a great job that I was promoted into the office as a leasing agent and part-time resident manager. One day, the Senior Property Manager came to the property and said that the property was in non-compliance due to the tax credit paperwork not being completed in time. I was asked if I could contact tenants and get paperwork completed. I was handed this huge tax credit book (Chapter 5 of the 4350.3 was included) with instructions and regulations on how to complete a certification. I read the entire book in two days and started my job as their certification specialist for the property soon after.

After completing and bringing the property back into compliance within two weeks, the property management company sent me to the Washington State Housing Finance Commission workshop where I learned how to be a Compliance Specialist.

I stayed there for nearly nine months before I was offered a position with Capitol Hill Housing in Seattle. They wanted me as their Compliance Manager. The Senior Property Manager who had discovered me had left the property management position and became the Director of Housing at Capitol Hill Housing. She remembered me when they had an opening. I applied for the position, took a test and was offered the job in May 2002. I had the oversight of 36 properties of mixed housing of every kind. HUD, Section 8, Tax Credits, HOME, State and City funding. Again, I took home several HUD handbooks and learned the regulations by heart. I attended every training workshop I could attend, volunteer my services at industry events, and asked many, many questions.

I ported out of the Bellingham Housing Authority and moved my Section 8 voucher to the Snohomish Housing Authority. In September 2002, I earned my COS and my career as a Compliance Manager started. Several years later, I was able to give my voucher to another family. I have been working at the Seattle Housing Authority for nearly 7 years.

Today, I am regarded as an expert in compliance in the HUD, Tax Credit, and Rural Housing industry. I am a success story because I was able to obtain housing for my children and me. Today, I am a single mother of three children (Lauren 25, Matthew 22, and Meagen 17). Without housing, we would have remained homeless far longer than a few weeks.

This is one of many success stories being collected from around the state by the Affordable Housing Management Association of Washington and the Washington State Council for Affordable & Rural Housing.

Contact Joe Diehl at (206) 290-5498 for more information or to offer your own story.