

OPINION: The threat to housing

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The Enquirer story “Sequester to slash housing help for the poor” (June 26) is being repeated all over the country this summer.

Sequestration is forcing housing authorities from coast to coast, including the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority, to choose from a menu of terrible options: freezing waiting lists, raising rents, dropping people from the voucher program, shuttering buildings. Consider these examples:

- California’s Santa Clara County Housing Authority, faced with a \$21 million cut because of sequestration, raised the rent for existing Section 8 tenants from 30 percent of their incomes to 35 percent. Think about that: A Social Security recipient whose check is \$1,000 a month will see her rent increase from \$300 to \$350.
- Setting aside wherever you stand on the budget debate as a whole – whether you’re a tea party member or a dyed-in-the-wool tax-and-spend liberal – imposing unfocused and draconian cuts like these on our country’s affordable housing programs is simply bone-headed. Bone-headed and hugely disruptive.

Ever since the Great Depression, our country has developed a broad bipartisan consensus over how to provide and pay for housing for our poorest citizens. In some cases, local housing authorities own and operate their own buildings. In other cases, the government provides subsidies to the developers and owners of housing on the condition that these units be rented to lower-income households at affordable rates. And finally, under the Section 8 program, the government provides vouchers to individual households to pay for a substantial portion of their rent.

And as a matter of fact, the government has gotten better over the years with all of these programs. The old “projects” of the 1950s and 1960s have often given way to mixed-income neighborhoods with both rental units and privately owned condos. (In Cincinnati, think of how City West replaced Laurel Homes and Lincoln Court in the West End.)

Seniors especially have many more options for safe and dignified housing thanks to federal and state housing programs. And the Section 8 voucher program gives renters the right to shop around and pick neighborhoods (and schools and doctors and shopping) appropriate to their individual needs. It also injects investment into the local real estate market and encourages landlords to maintain their buildings in good order.

So far, sequestration has been like a rumor of war, a distant, threatening sound. Potential airline delays that Congress quickly mitigates. Furloughs of faceless government workers in the nation’s capital.

But these cuts are serious. They hit right here at home and they affect our neighbors and our neighborhoods.

Families will be forced to move in with relatives or onto the streets. Landlords will be deprived of income they need to maintain their buildings. The housing stock will deteriorate. Local businesses will suffer. There will be an increased burden on emergency rooms, the health care system, mental health services,

the court system, policing, shelters, etc.

If Congress can figure out a way to spare airline travelers from longer lines, perhaps it can also figure out a way to keep roofs over the heads of our poorest citizens.

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