



Online tool would connect renters to affordable housing

'Housing Navigator' would be the second of its kind in U.S.

It can be hard enough to find an apartment to rent in Massachusetts — even with an abundance of online listing sites to help — but for low-income renters, apartment hunting can seem downright impossible — something a new online database aims to change.



A partnership including more than a dozen nonprofit and government agencies has come up with a solution to bridge the digital divide and make the process of finding and applying for affordable housing easier with a new tool called the Housing Navigator Massachusetts. The online tool set to launch sometime in 2020 will be a comprehensive, searchable database of all Massachusetts affordable rental housing where users will be able to find information on locations, open waitlists and listings for affordable housing all in one place.

The Housing Navigator will be one of the firsts of its kind. Minnesota is the only other state in the nation that offers a one-stop online tool collecting all available affordable housing listings, officials said.

“At a time when affordable housing is already in short supply, the idea that thousands of families suffer with unaffordable rents or risk homelessness simply because they can’t access information on where units are available is not acceptable,” Boston Foundation CEO Paul Grogan said in a statement. Grogan’s organization is working on the Housing Navigator in partnership with Kuehn Charitable Foundation and others.

“Housing Navigator Massachusetts is a smart solution that we are pleased to be able to support,” Grogan said.

Massachusetts lacks 186,775 units needed for households earning less than 50 percent of their area's median income, according to a 2016 report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

The situation is dire for the state's most needy residents. Massachusetts has fewer than half as many affordable units of housing available as it needs to serve extremely low-income residents — defined as households earning 30 percent or less of their area's median income, according to an April report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

When people are housing-burdened, a federal definition meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs, it often means they must forgo spending on health care, food, childcare, or other necessities. A single financial shock can cause this group to fall behind on rent, leading to eviction or even homelessness, according to the report.

Boston Mayor Martin Walsh called housing “the No. 1 issue” facing the city Sunday on WCVB's “On the Record.”

Under his leadership, 31,000 new housing units have been built, 60 percent of those for low-income residents. The plan is to build even more by 2030, he said.

“When our housing is plan complete, we will have 70,000 affordable housing units,” Walsh said on the program.

Herald wire services contributed to this report.