

Site would aid housing search

Group aims to help renters find subsidized apartments



When units at The Beverly, a 239-unit building near North Station aimed at middle-income renters, became available two years ago, some 6,600 people applied.

By Tim Logan, Globe Staff

If you want to rent a studio apartment for \$2,000 a month, there are loads of websites to help. But if you're looking for something more affordable, an online search usually proves to be fruitless.

That will soon change.

The Kuehn Charitable Foundation and several state housing agencies and affordable housing advocates are getting ready to launch what will be Massachusetts' biggest searchable database of deed-restricted affordable housing. Dubbed The Housing Navigator, it aims to be a one-stop online shop for all affordable housing in the state, easing an often-tedious search for subsidized apartments.

“It can be as hard to find affordable housing as it is to build it,” said Jennifer Gilbert, the executive director of Kuehn, which has long focused on affordable housing and historic preservation. “Harder, maybe.”

It’s a challenge Nora Lutz deals with daily. As manager of housing search services at AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, Lutz leads a team of eight caseworkers who help clients find a place to live. AIDS Action has been doing this for 10 years, she said, so it knows buildings and property managers and has developed a “relatively complex internal system” to track waitlists and eligibility criteria.

But Lutz knows that there’s a lot that the organization misses and that most people don’t have anywhere near this kind of in-depth information at their disposal.

“On your own with affordable housing, you’re completely in the dark about what’s available,” she said. “A tool that allows you to take this into their own hands would give people so much autonomy.”

That’s a major reason why Kuehn and Citizens Housing and Planning Association — a housing advocacy group — are partnering with state agencies that finance affordable housing in Massachusetts to create a comprehensive, searchable database of what are probably hundreds of thousands of income-restricted, rent-subsidized apartments across the state. They’re gathering data and starting to test the website with potential users — both tenants and the housing advocates who work with them — with a goal of launching it some time next year.

The system will be a major upgrade from the 20-year-old Mass Access Registry, which covers some, but far from all, affordable housing in the state, said Rachel Heller, chief executive of the citizens housing association. And it’ll be broader than a database maintained by the City of Boston. The groups are aiming to make the Housing Navigator as user-friendly as possible for would-be renters to search and for property managers to post listings. The idea is to cover units funded under a wide range of federal, state, and local programs — all in one place.

“Massachusetts has been good at creating so many different types of programs to create affordable housing,” Heller said. “We need to better help people identify everything that’s out there.”

That lack of broad information is one reason that high-profile new developments often draw huge numbers of applicants.

When units at The Beverly, a 239-unit building near North Station aimed at middle-income renters, became available two years ago, the line just to get a lottery number stretched out the door of a city office building and a block down Court Street downtown — some 6,600 people

applied. But in a state with a wide array of affordable housing programs, and where cities such as Boston and Cambridge have long required new buildings to set aside units for lower-wage tenants, a surprising number of low-cost apartments can fall under the radar.

Municipal boundaries also come into play. While some communities have programs that are relatively easy to search, they're often run at the local level. Looking for housing in other cities and towns can mean starting anew — a time-consuming and complicated process — and that limits people, Gilbert said.

“Maybe you're thinking, ‘I could take this job in whatever town, but would there be someplace there I could live?’ ” she said. “You often literally cannot find out.”

Gilbert and Heller say the database could have other benefits, such as helping policy makers to get a better feel for what kind of affordable housing people need, and where it's most needed — including variables such as studios or three-bedrooms, and locations close to job centers or near the T.

“It'll give us a sense of where people are looking,” Heller said. “There's certainly lots we can learn about where people are hoping to go.”

Eventually, Gilbert said, they hope to upgrade the site to make it easier for people to not just find potential apartments but to apply to rent them. It's the sort of thing that's common in the world of market-rate rentals — where you can rent an apartment online without ever seeing it in person — but a rarity when it comes to affordable housing. That, Gilbert said, needs to change.

“Basic information on housing shouldn't be a luxury,” she said. “It should be for everybody. Let's provide it.”

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