

Affordable housing plans spur advocates' pushback

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Jackie, a mother of two young children, resides with her family due to difficulties finding an apartment after losing her job. Challenges arise as her income, credit score and eviction history hinder her search for suitable housing. Additionally, she struggles to find accommodations within proximity to her children's school and accessible to a bus line, which is essential for securing and maintaining employment.

This is the hypothetical scenario Monroe County Executive Adam Bello used to introduce four new pilot programs to help the "Jackies" of Monroe County.

"You can't solve the housing issue with just one program," Bello said at a Tuesday afternoon press conference on Main Street.

The \$7.8 million initiative seeks to expand affordable housing choices for low- and moderate-income families.

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Additionally, the county plans to convene a roundtable involving developers and New York State agencies to foster the creation or renovation of affordable housing units.

“The programs the county is announcing today are thoughtful and powerful additions to the tools we currently have,” Michael Burns, deputy mayor of Rochester, said. “We are making progress, but we realize there is much more to do.”

The four programs include:

Housing Search Navigator & After Care Program:

Case managers will assist up to 720 low to moderate-income clients or voucher holders. The program includes support with exploring housing options, accessing listings, arranging transportation for property viewings, and providing guidance with rental applications and associated fees. Also, case managers will mediate any disputes between tenants and landlords if issues arise.

Landlord Incentive Program: Landlords and property owners will be incentivized to offer up to 1,500 additional housing units to low-income tenants and voucher holders through various cash incentives, including leasing bonuses, limited warranties against unpaid rent or damages, and referral payments.



Monroe County Executive Adam Bell announces a \$7.8 million plan to promote affordable housing.

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Rental Repair Program: The program will provide financial assistance to landlords for renovating up to 600 apartments, ensuring they are ready for occupancy. Landlords eligible for participation must own no more than ten units and agree to terms restricting rent hikes.

Landlord/Tenant Mediation Program: Certified mediators will undergo training to intervene in conflicts between tenants and landlords, aiming to prevent evictions. This program will cater to the needs of up to 250 landlords and tenants.

“The initiatives being introduced today reflect what community members are asking for,” Aqua Porter, the

Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative (RMAPI) executive director, said. They include assistance in finding affordable housing that is safe and healthy for families and supports thriving relationships between tenants and landlords.”

The pilot programs result from the recommendations of an RMAPI housing working group and a 2021 housing study that identified barriers to permanent housing for Monroe County residents.

An advocate for the unhoused, Amy D’Amico said she believes the initiatives introduced favor landlords.

“I appreciate the need for new units,” she said. “Being a sycophant to the ones who have been problematic in raising rents sky high and illegally refusing to rent to DHS voucher tenants is not a smart solution.”

According to the 2021 U.S. Census Bureau report, 50% of renters in Monroe County were considered rent-burdened, meaning more than 30% of their income went toward paying rent.

Part of a statement from county legislature Vice President Mercedes Vazquez-Simmons and legislator Rachel Barnhart said the proposed housing initiatives fall short.

“It doesn’t center the needs of renters, and it takes a ‘deficit-based’ view of people experiencing financial hardship and limited incomes. Everyday people don’t need their hands held to find apartments – they need rental assistance.”

Requests for proposals related to the pilot programs will be issued later this month.

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