Tab 1

The long road home through D.C.'s housing voucher system

Getting a housing voucher is just the first hurdle to exit homelessness in D.C. For many, moving into housing can take months as they face limited resources, inaccessible apartments, and delays.

By Emily Sohl

Phillip Duckett secured an apartment after decades of housing instability in Anacostia, D.C. Photo credit: Emily Sohl

Nearly a decade ago, just out of prison and on probation, Phillip Duckett collapsed on the pavement outside Union Station. Duckett struggled to breathe and was rushed to the hospital. There, he was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) — a condition he said was worsened by decades of smoking during years of living on the streets, in shelters, and in prison.

For the next several years, as Duckett hauled oxygen tanks through shelters and hospital rooms, he remained without stable housing.

"I spent most of my time, when I was on the streets, before I got into the program, just wandering around," he said.

It wasn't until May 2024 that Duckett finally got a key to his own apartment through D.C.'s Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) program. While Duckett's is a success story, that's not guaranteed in a process that can be overwhelmed by demand, slowed down by red tape, and complicated by a lack of communication and stigma. It's gotten faster for people to move into housing with PSH vouchers in the last two years, but people who work with voucher holders say there are still problems.

"There's a lot that doesn't work about the housing process," said Arjenaye Quick, Duckett's case manager at Pathways to Housing DC, a local nonprofit that administers some of the city's PSH vouchers.

The PSH program provides housing vouchers to people experiencing homelessness who also have chronic physical or mental health conditions that make it hard for them to work, like Duckett's COPD. It's one of the main ways unsheltered people move into housing in the city. But while PSH and other voucher programs can be life-changing, it can be difficult to escape homelessness, especially for those already navigating instability, illness, or the lasting impacts of incarceration.

Getting a voucher

Ebony Scott became homeless shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began. She lost her job at a hotel, and soon after, her home. For three years, she lived at Harriet Tubman Women's Shelter, where she said she endured violence and instability. Getting connected to housing felt like a long shot.

"A couple times, it seemed like a group of women were able to go — they found housing for them — but then it was like, 'but not y'all,'" Scott said, referring to case workers at the shelter. "You'd have to wait and try to get in at the right time to be the next group."

But Scott said she kept showing up at drop-in centers to speak with case managers until someone took notice. "Finally, they saw my persistence and they started to take me seriously," she said.

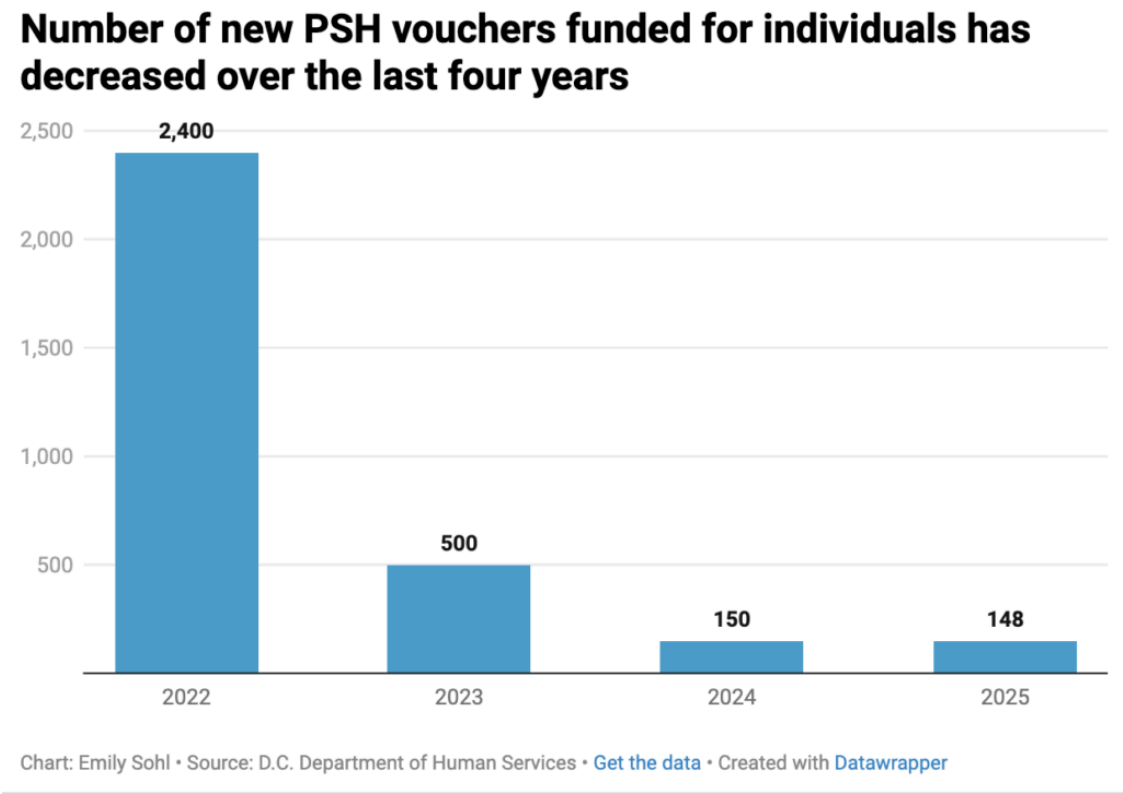
Scott is one of many unhoused D.C. residents who secured a PSH voucher, which provides long-term subsidized rent and case management for those who are chronically homeless. To qualify, a person must be verifiably homeless for at least a year.

In D.C., thousands of people meet that definition, according to Andrew Wassenich, director of policy at Miriam's Kitchen. According to the 2025 Point-in-Time Count, a one-night census of

people experiencing homelessness in the city, at least 1,430 adults in D.C. were experiencing chronic homelessness in January, and it's likely hundreds more will experience it throughout the year. Yet the number of new vouchers the city funds each year has declined since a record increase in 2022.

The District's fiscal 2025 budget included vouchers for just 148 individuals — a steep drop from 2,400 vouchers in 2022 and 500 in 2023. While the city initially slowed investments after 2022 due to a backlog of unused vouchers, now few are available.

"When you have so few interventions in a given year, it's really hard to prioritize," said Wassenich.



People experiencing homelessness in D.C. are tracked through the Homeless Management Information System, which logs when someone accesses services, whether through a drop-in center, an outreach worker, or a shelter stay. People are assessed using a vulnerability index that takes into account the length of time they've been homeless, as well as their health and other risk

factors, with those determined to be most vulnerable or having experienced homelessness the longest prioritized for vouchers.

Even for those selected, the application process can be long, sometimes leaving both case managers and unhoused individuals in the dark. Once someone is matched with a voucher, a housing organization — such as Miriam's Kitchen or Pathways to Housing DC — helps them complete the application. The process involves gathering paperwork and submitting materials to D.C.'s Department of Human Services (DHS) and then the D.C. Housing Authority (DCHA). Participants are now matched to case managers much faster than they were in 2022, waiting just 16 days on average as opposed to 163, due to the system's increased capacity through hiring, according to DHS's voucher dashboard.

While DHS's public voucher dashboard says the government has worked over the past few years to speed up the process, including revising the application itself so it takes less time to complete and reducing additional documentation requirements, it can still take time — on average, just over 300 days between being matched to a voucher and moving into housing, though this is a marked improvement from the 447 days it took in fiscal year 2022, according to the dashboard.

"The communication between DHS and DCHA is not great," said Wassenich. "Things get lost, things don't get communicated, and voucher applications sometimes sit for 60, 90, 120 days or more."

Quick said those communication gaps trickle down to clients, too, who often feel left in the dark and discouraged.

"This is a very, very stressful point in their life — after dealing with stress after stress, after being on the streets for however long, or being in shelters for however long," she said. "It's really important that they can visualize themselves in a home and that they have goals and motivations for doing so."

Moving into housing

Securing a PSH voucher is just the beginning. The next step — finding an apartment — presents a new set of barriers. And if a voucher holder doesn't secure housing within 180 days of receiving the voucher, they must reapply, according to federal rules.

"In theory, you can go to any apartment in the city and you can apply for it just like anybody else, and if you get approved, you can move in," said Wassenich. "But that is not a slam dunk."

While D.C. law requires landlords to include a certain number of subsidized units and prohibits outright denial based on voucher status, that doesn't stop landlords from rejecting individual applications, Wassenich explained.

"There are plenty of buildings in the city that still discriminate and will find reasons to not accept you," said Wassenich. "Or they've set up rules that make it impossible for you to be able to use your voucher there."

DCHA has worked to ensure participants can find apartments, according to public statements, including hosting landlord town halls and providing housing locator services to people with vouchers looking to lease up. A New Lease on Life program works with landlords interested in renting to voucher holders to identify available units for voucher holders and make sure landlords have a point of contact within the government. The Coalition, a nonprofit supporting economic development in the city, also offers a landlord partnership fund, with the goal of incentivizing more landlords to rent to people with vouchers.

Finding a place to live can be even more difficult for people with prior convictions or accessibility needs. Case managers at the 801 East Men's Shelter struggled to place Duckett due to his criminal record and mobility challenges.

Duckett, who was incarcerated for firearm possession, drug charges, and parole violations, said he began selling drugs at age 17 while living on the streets. Now in his early 80s, his COPD causes him to struggle with shortness of breath — making stairs and certain buildings inaccessible.

These factors made it significantly harder for Duckett to find a unit that both met his needs and would accept him. With so few accessible apartments available, the process dragged on so long that he had to reapply for his voucher twice before finally securing housing, Duckett said.

The next step was submitting a Request for Tenancy Approval Packet to DCHA. This includes a rent reasonableness assessment to ensure the landlord's asking price aligns with market rates to prevent the government from overpaying landlords. If the rent is too high according to the agency's rent reasonableness analysis, DCHA is required by federal guidance to deny the lease unless the landlord lowers the rent. Additional costs, such as amenity fees, can also become dealbreakers for potential residents, though DCHA can help cover utilities and security deposits.

The city is working to shorten the process from voucher match to move-in.

“DHS is committed to ensuring that participants matched to permanent housing resources have access to safe and stable housing as quickly as possible,” a DHS spokesperson wrote in an email to Street Sense. “All of our partners – DCHA, landlords, property managers and contracted service providers – play essential roles in this process, and we look forward to continuing to improve it for the people we serve.”

Since 2022, the average time to lease up has dropped from 475 days to 303 days in 2024, according to the DHS dashboard, which also says the agency hopes to reduce the timeline to 120 days. Miriam’s Kitchen and other housing organizations hope to bring that down further to 90 days — a goal Wassenich calls “an impossible feat,” but one worth pursuing. “It will relieve a lot of tension in the system,” he said.

‘I’m not on the street anymore’

For those who make it through the process, the results can be profound. Scott said she was blown away by the support she received through the PSH program.

“My mind was like — ‘huh?’” said Scott.

Now, Scott’s living in her own apartment and working in maintenance at the Advanced Technical Center, a technical school for young people. For the first time in years, she has hope. But she’s still wary of the future, especially with the cuts threatened under the Trump presidency.

“It’s kind of sad because now, with everything being cut, it’s like, again, we’re like, ‘what?’” she said, expressing concern over job security and federal budget cuts.

Duckett, too, is rebuilding. Like Scott, he’s hopeful — but cautious.

“I’m still trying to adapt my mind to, ‘I’m not on the street anymore,’” said Duckett. “I don’t have to worry about being in the snow, being in the cold, or any of those things like that.”

He hasn’t used his oven yet — he said he’s just not used to having one — but he’s determined not to take his new home for granted.

“I’m not gonna do nothing to lose this place,” said Duckett.