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County will pay rent for some residents

Commissioners vote to use \$98,000 for Section 8 shortfall

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TAVARES

The county will pay the rent in September for low-income residents who depend on federal housing aid.

Many of the 435 families enrolled in Section 8 Housing in Lake County were facing the possibility of eviction if they could not get together rent money that the locally administered federal program discovered it could not pay.

Then commissioners agreed this week to draw \$98,000 from general-fund reserves to cover the September shortfall.

The program overspent its budget for fiscal year 2008-09, which ends Sept. 30, anticipating that the U.S.

Department of Housing and Urban Development would boost payments this year because of increasing need in Lake County.

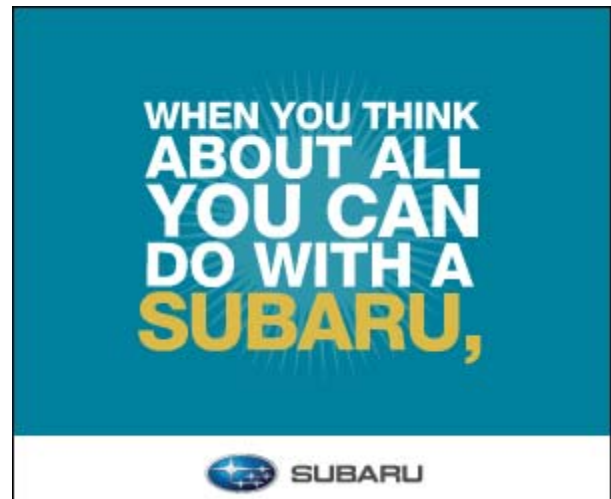
More than 2,000 families are on the program's waiting list.

Commissioner Jimmy Conner fumed over the funding gaffe — the second financial blunder traced to the county's department of Community Services in less than six months.

"It goes beyond gross mismanagement of taxpayer dollars. It's just plain negligence," Conner said. "The tax-paying public deserves better."

He said the county shouldn't have to spend local tax money on federal programs.

Commissioner Jennifer Hill was not as outraged by the funding emergency. She pointed out that the housing program's staff must reconcile monies that are allocated and expended according to different government funding schedules. The county's fiscal year, for instance, runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30, while the federal government operates on a traditional calendar year.



"Every penny was appropriated appropriately," she said.

The longtime director of Community Services, Fletcher Smith, retired in June and could not be reached for comment.

Earlier this year, commissioners learned the department overspent nearly \$70,000 on administrative costs to replace and repair homes damaged by tornadoes that hit the county in 2007.

A disaster declaration made Lake County eligible for \$5million in recovery aid from the Florida Housing Finance Corp. to assist survivors of the storms that killed 21 people in the Lady Lake and Lake Mack areas of the county. No more than 10 percent of the funds dispensed in aid could be spent on administration.

When the county returned \$1.6million in unused aid to the state, county officials discovered they had spent more than allowed on staffers who processed and justified payments.

Stacey Kleinfeld, manager of Section 8 Housing in Lake County, said the shortfall in the program was not a result of administrative costs but increased payments to recipients, half of whom are elderly or disabled. Many others are considering "working poor," and some are victims of the economy who have lost jobs or had their work hours shortened, she said.

Kleinfeld said the county's action may have saved some families from a difficult choice: Buy groceries and face eviction, or pay the rent and go hungry.

"It was a gift," she said.

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