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News > Local

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UF Shimberg Center gets \$500,000 for housing research

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The MacArthur Foundation awarded a \$1 million grant last week to the Florida Partnership to preserve aging rental units in the state.

Because of the recent foreclosure crisis, rental housing has become more important. And the real estate bubble's burst makes it smarter to preserve aging housing than to build new ones. This market shift guides the way Florida Partnership plans to use the donated funds.

"Traditionally the way Florida has dealt with affordable housing has been through new construction," said Cecka Green, communications director for the Florida Housing Finance Corporation. "With the housing market, the bubble has burst, and there's a lot of stock that's already out there. We are looking to properly preserve units that are already built and have an affordability, because we don't want to lose that."

About 71 percent of extremely low-income renter households in Florida paid more than 40 percent of their income for rent in 2007, according to the MacArthur Foundation's Web site.

The Florida Partnership includes the UF Shimberg Center for Housing Studies, the Florida Housing Finance Corporation and the Florida Housing Coalition. Florida was one of 12 cities and states to receive the foundation's Window of Opportunity grant, which awarded \$32.5 million to help agencies preserve more than 70,000 low-income rental homes nationwide.

The Florida Partnership aims to preserve 20,000 low-income rental units by 2019, focusing on seniors and people with disabilities, Green said.

The UF Shimberg Center will receive \$500,000 to research and help the state decide what rental housing stock has a greater need for preservation.

"We're looking specifically at rental housing that's privately owned and publicly subsidized," said Anne Ray, a leading researcher at the Shimberg Center. "Many of those properties are at risk of rising rents, demolition or at risk of losing subsidies from the government."

The Shimberg Center will also research which tenants are most affected and the role private unsubsidized stock plays in providing affordable housing to Florida's communities, Ray said.

The Florida Housing Coalition was awarded \$475,000 to educate and train state nonprofit organizations to acquire, rehabilitate and manage long-term affordable rental housing for extremely low-income populations, said Jaimie Ross, president of the Florida Housing Coalition.

The Florida Housing Finance Corporation was awarded \$25,000 to support peer networking activities for nonprofit and for-profit developers to help them rehabilitate aging privately owned properties with expiring subsidies.

"If those units don't receive the proper attention that they need, we could lose a significant portion of our affordable housing stock," Green said. "The MacArthur grant provides us with the catalyst we need to be moving in the right direction to achieve that goal."

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