**Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) Program**

**Mohave County Housing Authority (MCHA)**

 **General Program Information:**

**What is the FSS Program?**

Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) is a program that enables HUD-assisted families to increase their earned income and reduce their dependency on welfare assistance, rental subsidies and offers the opportunity of moving to homeownership. The Mohave County Housing Authority **requires** participation in the FSS program to become eligible for transitioning from rental assistance to homeowner assistance. The Homeownership Program is coordinated by the FSS Program Coordinator. Additional information on this program is available upon request.

**How does the program work?**

Once an eligible family is selected to participate in the program, MCHA and the Head of FSS execute an FSS Contract of Participation that specifies the rights and responsibilities of both parties. The term of the FSS contract is generally 5 years, but it may be extended for another 2 years by MCHA for good cause. *For the purposes of this program, the head of the FSS family does not have to be the head of household for the Section 8 assistance. You can designate any member of the family over 18 who can seek and maintain suitable employment as required by the program.*

The FSS contract also incorporates the Head of FSS individual training and services plan (ITSP.) The ITSP is the document that records the plan/goals for the family. That is, the series of intermediate and long-term goals, along with the steps the family needs to take and the services/resources they may need to access to achieve those goals. Some of the services coordinated through the program include: childcare, transportation, education, job training, employment counseling, and financial literacy, along with homeownership counseling. Services are generally not provided by MCHA, but rather outsourced to service providers in the community.

An interest-bearing escrow account is established by MCHA for each participating family. Any increases in the family’s rent because of **increased earned income** during the family’s participation in the program results in a credit to the family’s escrow account. Once a family graduates from the program, they may access the escrow and use it for any purpose.

**Who is eligible to participate in the FSS program?**

The FSS program through the Mohave County Housing Authority (MCHA) is only available to current Section 8 participants. Those who have ported in from another jurisdiction and are enrolled in an FSS program through their initial housing authority may also participate. You must have a current lease to begin the Contract of Participation for FSS.

**What is the role of the FSS Program Coordinator?**

FSS program coordinators assist the family in the development of the ITSP, they assure FSS program participants are linked to the supportive services they need to achieve economic self-sufficiency and that the escrow account is properly maintained, among other responsibilities such as conducting interviews and processing annual re-exams, interims, port outs and moves.

**Can MCHA screen families for participation in the FSS program?**

MCHA may screen families for interest and motivation to participate in the FSS program, as long as the factors used by MCHA are those which solely measure the family’s interest and motivation, MCHA may not screen for education, job history, credit rating, marital status, or number of children for example, and may not consider any factors which may result in discriminatory practices or treatment toward individuals with disabilities or minority or non-minority groups.

**What is an FSS contract of participation?**

One of the basic requirements of the FSS program is the execution of an FSS Contract of Participation between the Head of FSS and MCHA. The FSS Contract of Participation includes the rights and responsibilities of the FSS family and MCHA, the services to be provided to the family and the activities to be completed by the family.

**What is the term of the FSS Contract of Participation?**

The term of the FSS contract is up to *five years*, however, such term may be extended for up to two more years if there is good cause for the extension, such as serious illness or involuntary loss of employment. Participants may also successfully graduate in less than five years.

**What are the participant’s responsibilities under the FSS Contract of Participation?**

The FSS contract requires that the family comply with the lease, that all FSS family members (not just family members who elected to participate in FSS) are welfare free at the time the FSS contract is completed and that the Head of FSS seeks and maintains *suitable* employment. FSS participants must attend available trainings and all appointments that are set to improve their standings or provide essential information that is listed on their ITSP. Non-attendance could result in being exited from the program with ineligibility of re-enrollment. Noncompliance with the FSS contract without good cause may result in the termination from the FSS program or withholding/termination of supportive services. Termination (or exit) from the FSS program **may not result in the termination of the family’s rental assistance**.

**What is an Individual Training and Services Plan (ITSP)?**

The ITSP is a written plan that lists the services to be provided to each participating family member, the activities to be completed by the family member and the agreed upon completion dates of the services and activities. The ITSP also establishes specific interim and final goals by which MCHA and the family can measure the family’s progress toward self-sufficiency. The ITSP is incorporated into the Contract of Participation.

**What is an escrow account?**

An interest-bearing account established by MCHA on behalf of the FSS family where deposits are made throughout the duration of the family’s participation in the FSS program, if and when a family’s rent increases **as a result of increased earned income** of the FSS family.

**Can a family access the funds of its escrow account before the family successfully completes the program?**

MCHA may make a portion of the escrow account available, interim disbursement, to the family during the term of the contract if MCHA determines that the family has fulfilled certain interim goals established in the contract and requires a portion of the FSS escrow account funds for purposes consistent with the contract of participation.

**When does a family receive all the funds in its FSS escrow account?**

Generally, when the family has fulfilled all its FSS obligations under the contract *on or before the expiration of the contract* (including the obligation to be welfare free at the time of the FSS contract expiration date) that no family member is a recipient of welfare assistance.

**Under what circumstances can escrow account funds be forfeited?**

A FSS family will forfeit its escrow account if the contract of participation is terminated in accordance with the regulations, the family is still receiving welfare at the expiration of the contract term, the contract was not completed at the end of the contract term, or the family violates housing rules per MCHA and HUD Section 8 program guidelines.

**Can families be required to participate in the FSS program?**

Participation of families in the FSS program is **voluntary** and cannot be a condition of receipt of assistance under the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Section 8 programs.

**Can a family continue to receive housing assistance after completion of the FSS contract?**

While one of the objectives of the program is to reduce the dependency of low-income families on federal, state, and local housing assistance programs most families that complete the program will still need and may continue to receive assistance for housing. Only if you become self-sufficient and no longer need assistance, will you no longer receive assistance.

**What is the history of the FSS program?**

FSS was established in 1990 by section 554 of the National Affordable Housing Act, which amended Title I of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 by adding Section 23 for the FSS program. It is a successor program to project self-sufficiency and operation bootstrap. It was modified by the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (QHRWA) of 1998.

**Where can I find more information about FSS?**

You may contact Mohave County Housing Authority FSS Program Coordinator, Amy McReynolds, at (928) 753-0723 extension 4196, or email to McReyA@mohave.gov. You may also discuss the program enrollment options with your current housing specialist that can generate a referral to the program on your behalf. If you have additional question on the program, enrollment or how it works please reach out to Amy. Thank you for your interest in this program, and I look forward to hearing from you.

**Why choose to participate in FSS?**

If you are currently working, this program will allow you to generate additional savings to use toward goals you set to accomplish for you or your family. Ideally, we would want you to enroll in FSS before you have an income increase so your baseline income on the contract would be at its lowest point, allowing you to automatically gain savings when you have an income increase. Upcoming changes to HUD policy will affect the escrow benefit, but if you put the work into the program, you will gain more than just the savings account. How much you can accomplish on this program is entirely up to you.