

S.F. proposal would help veterans struggling to get affordable housing

From the San Francisco Chronicle
Mallory Moench
October 22, 2021

Veteran homelessness is a nationwide issue, with tens of thousands of veterans homeless at the last count, so it's no surprise that former service members can struggle to get housed in San Francisco, one of the most expensive cities in the country.

At the last count, there were just over 600 chronically homeless veterans in San Francisco — 8% of the city's overall total of unhoused people. While hundreds are homeless, thousands more earn low incomes and are ineligible for some types of housing help, which can lead them to pay too much of their incomes in rent.

“Veterans face many challenges when they come home and begin their reintegration back into our community,” Supervisor Gordon Mar said during Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting. “Many veterans have slipped into poverty and are at risk of homelessness when either affordable housing or employment isn't available.”

To make a dent in the issue, Mar this week proposed legislation to make it easier for low-income veterans to get housed by bumping them up on the priority list in San Francisco's affordable housing lottery.

Four categories of people get preference in the system: those who live and work in San Francisco, those who live in the same neighborhood they're applying to, residents displaced in the city's redevelopment in the 1960s and '70s, and people who lost housing because of a fire or were evicted because their landlord moved in or turned over the property.

Mar doesn't want to create a new preference category but give veterans priority that would serve as a tiebreaker against an applicant who hadn't served in the military. If approved, the proposed legislation directs the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development to analyze if the prioritization would disparately impact any other group. If it did, Mar could amend the legislation.

Max Barnes, spokesman for the Mayor's housing office, said Wednesday the department believes the current preferences are "responsive to the affordable housing needs of San Franciscans."

The department has developed targeted marketing for veterans on the city's affordable homeownership programs and will review the demographics of the city's veterans to find any other opportunities and gaps in connecting them to affordable housing, he said.

In San Francisco, veterans who earn below 50% of the area median income can already receive other kinds of housing help. They get preference for public housing under California law and can get federally subsidized rental vouchers in privately owned buildings.

There is less help for around 11,000 veterans in the next income bracket earning 50% to 80% of the area median income — currently between \$46,650 and \$74,600. While Veterans Affairs offers home loans, it's not enough support to afford living in San Francisco, and loans can't be used for the city's affordable housing program, Mar's office said. As a result, this group is often rent burdened, paying more than 30% of their income for an apartment, and at increased risk of homelessness, Mar added.

Multiple people called into public comment during Tuesday's Board meeting to support the proposal. Courtney Ellington, the executive director of the Veterans Success Center of San Francisco, said there isn't enough affordable housing to meet the demand.

"We have folks who come in daily without a place to stay, and we are running out of referrals," she said.

A related piece of legislation Mar introduced this week would give veterans and active duty personnel free admission to certain city parks including the Japanese Tea Garden, Coit Tower, the Conservatory of Flowers, swimming pools and the Botanical Garden. The same group would get a 50% discount at Camp Mather, golf and tennis facilities.

Mar introduced the legislative package — co-sponsored by Supervisor Catherine Stefani — in advance of Veterans Day on Nov. 11.