

Housing agency expands

■ Housing Assistance Corp. ventures into the rental market with the intention of training, educating tenants and landlords.

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The Cape's largest affordable housing advocacy program is making an unorthodox attempt to enter the rental agency business.

Hyannis-based Housing Assistance Corp. has long provided services, including rental subsidies and educational programs, to Cape residents who lack affordable housing.

HAC's newest program, Cape Community Real Estate, seeks to match property owners with year-round renters and to educate both on their respective rights and responsibilities under the law. For a fee of \$1,100, CCRE will list the property, hold an open house and conduct tenant screenings and property inspections.

"The long-term objective of the program is to increase the number of rentals available on the Cape," said Nancy Davison, director of consumer education at HAC. "We hope to ... make it easier or more profitable for property owners to keep their rental properties on the market or bring them onto the market."

Like other real estate agents, CCRE will list and show properties to prospective tenants.

But CCRE also offers workshops for landlords and tenants, where both can learn about their legal obligations.

"What we're doing is creating better educated landlords and tenants," Davison said.

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"Our relationship doesn't end with the lease signing. And that is different from what most real estate agents offer at this time."

The Cape has a notoriously short supply of affordable year-round rental properties. Davison said CCRE will reach out to home owners reluctant to rent because they are put off by the prospect of finding a reliable tenant.

"Most of the rental units on the Cape are owned by individual property owners," she said. "They have difficulty providing rental screening, conducting inspections, and dealing with the day to day issues that come up."

Davison said she isn't concerned about other rental agents who offer similar services. "There might be some competition, to be sure, but there is plenty of work to go around," she said.

But at least one local real estate agent who specializes in year-round rentals questions CCRE's ability to compete.

"There's no way that any rookie broker is going to be able to do what we do," said Ronald Bourgeois of Bass River Properties.

Bourgeois, who serves as president of the Cape Cod Property Owners and Landlords Association, said CCRE will operate from a disadvantage. Property owners expect rental agents to have allegiance to them alone. Property owners might view CCRE as beholden to tenants because of its ties to HAC, he said.

"My loyalties are to the landlord," he said. "I put in writing to my landlords that if someone violates the lease ... I will evict them and re-rent it for free."

Moreover, Bourgeois said expanding the market of rental properties is very difficult. He said he solicits 4,000 to 5,000 property owners a quarter, offering to rent their homes. At most, he converts four to five of them into landlords a year, he said.

Indeed, larger demographic trends indicate that Cape property owners are increasingly likely to use their homes themselves, either as a summer getaway or a year-round residence.

In 1990, 15.8 percent of all Barnstable County housing units were renter-occupied, according the U.S. Census. By 2000, the time of the most recent census, that figure dropped to 14.3 percent. Demographers suspect that figure has continued to shrink as more retirees have relocated to the area.

Bourgeois said those factors will make it hard for CCRE to keep up. "I think their intent is right but I don't think they know how intricate it is," he said. "This is a tough way to make a living."

The receding rental market

■ Just 1 in 7 Barnstable County housing units is a rental.

■ The Cape has the highest rate of home ownership in Massachusetts.

■ Home ownership on the Cape increased 31 percent during the 1990s.

■ The ratio of rental properties to overall housing units dropped 18 percent during the same period.

Source: Census data