

Affordable housing crunch marginalizes many
As prices skyrocket, governments, nonprofits struggle to help needy
By RACHAEL JACKSON, The News Journal
Posted Monday, June 11, 2007

Erica Gray (right) tries to get her children, Eriana, 10, and Micayla, 10 months, ready for bed in the room they share at a YWCA center in Wilmington. [\(Buy photo\)](#) The News Journal WILLIAM BRETZGER

Erica Gray is a busy single mother of three and a business management major on a full scholarship at Wilmington College. She's also homeless.

Gray, 26, tried to get an apartment through several programs but ended up with an \$89-a-month room at a shelter.

Her situation is the product of a confluence of pressures on government housing programs.

Statewide, monthly rents for a two-bedroom apartment have gone up more than \$100 between 2004 and 2006. Wages and government subsidy programs have struggled to keep pace and many who previously could barely afford to rent -- the single parents, disabled and the elderly -- now find themselves without roofs, beds and house keys to call their own.

They've turned to government housing programs only to be told that they'll have to wait months, and often years, to get help. Subsidized housing sites statewide have a combined waiting list of 5,500. In New Castle County, 700 people are on a Section 8 waiting list -- and the county hasn't accepted applications since 2000. The county Department of Community Services estimates that it gets about 50 inquiries per week for the Section 8 voucher waiting list. Everyone is turned away.

The Delaware Housing Coalition, an advocacy group, estimates that there's a statewide shortage of 12,000 affordable units.

So, in the meantime, people wait. Many double up with family or friends. Others go to homeless shelters, staying longer than they used to, leading more nonprofit agencies to create long-term residences like the one where Gray lives.

Section 8 struggles to keep pace

Through the Section 8 voucher program, also referred to as the Housing Choice voucher program, participants can live anywhere the vouchers are accepted. They generally pay about a third of their expendable income toward rent, and the government picks up the rest.

Funding for housing programs from the Department of Housing and Urban Development has not kept up with the costs incurred by state agencies and nonprofits, which administer programs on the local level. For instance, the Wilmington Housing Authority watched Section 8 funding go down 6 percent in 2005, another 6 percent in 2006 and go up just 1 percent this year, a year when some housing advocates nationwide cautiously applauded the Bush administration for catching up with previous shortfalls.

President Bush's proposed 2008 budget looks worse. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the budget would cut \$2 billion, when adjusted for inflation.

The YWCA-operated Home-life Management Center, where Gray lives, has been getting less federal money every year, said Center Director Patricia Pettaway Ward. It has kept up, she said, because of donors.

Last year, federal funding cuts led Cornerstone West, a housing-focused nonprofit in Wilmington, to cut five positions.

"We also had to reduce the number of people we can help," said director Paul Calistro.

Cost, location often a hindrance

For the first time, Gov. Minner has asked for \$7.5 million in the bond bill to go toward preservation of existing units. To preserve about 900 units, the State Housing Authority plans to ask for \$7.5 million for this year and the following two years.

Many say that the money is desperately needed, not only to address the shortage, but also for upkeep.

Mary West, a 24-year-old nursing assistant and single mom, lives in a Dover Air Force Base housing complex that was converted to subsidized housing in 1977. She points to the broken door, drafty windows and patch jobs in her town house. She was on a waiting list for two years to get this place, but she now feels like she's watching it fall apart.

West said that despite her rent subsidy, money is so tight that she's joining the Army National Guard. She won't have to worry about her complex, because a private developer has stepped in to rehab it.

For those forced to turn to temporary housing, the situation is worse.

Gray, the Wilmington College student, lives in tight quarters at the YWCA center. Between the two bunk beds, crib, dresser and a stack of shoes in the corner, it's difficult to squeeze through to get to the closet.

Gray has applied for a customer service job with the city of Wilmington. She's optimistic, but she also knows that if she gets the job and the \$29,000 to \$31,000 salary that comes with it, she still won't be able to support her three children, live in a market-rate apartment and save money.

She doesn't have much savings, a problem shared by many trying to transition into an apartment, which costs about \$1,600 up front, said Jennifer Dondero, a case manager in the housing and financial department of Cornerstone West in Wilmington.

"The ability to come up with a security deposit and first month's rent and moving expenses as well as keeping up with their current apartment's rent is really an impossibility," she said. "It doesn't give people an opportunity."

Even if they are able to find an apartment, the location is often a problem. Marietta Coleman, a former factory worker who lives in subsidized housing in Dover, said her neighborhood is dangerous.

Other times, the cheapest place to build turns out to be far away from jobs or even bus stops.

Long stays, crowded rooms

At the bottom of waiting lists and at the end of their ropes, people across the state are turning to homeless shelters.

Brother Ronald Giannone, executive director of the Ministry of Caring, a Wilmington charity, said a standard stay in his emergency shelter used to be 30 days. Now it's 45 to 60 days. In response, the agency created transitional residences and permanent residences with payment plans similar to government programs.

"If we didn't have the transitional, the people would be staying four to six months in the shelter and it wouldn't be fair to the homeless trying to get out of the cold and the heat," he said.

Ruth Pugh, executive director of the Ruth N. Dorsey Relief Shelter in Dover, said she often keeps people longer than the standard 30 days. She said she sees many single moms come through her shelter who have minimal job skills, are on long waiting lists for permanent housing and simply cannot support their families.

For them, she is creating a new set of transitional housing that would focus on teaching them skills that would lead to higher-paying jobs.

By earning her college degree, Gray also hopes to boost her income. She, too, sees it as the only way to stop depending on others and better her situation.

Squeezed between the bunk beds of her room with a thick accounting book, Gray mumbles about assets, liabilities and interest and remembers those words.

"Every time I study, I think I'm going to get out of here," she said.

States to play bigger role

Housing advocacy groups nationwide have been pressuring all levels of government for more money for affordable housing.

But in recent years, the national HUD budget has suffered severely, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which says that in order to maintain the current level of Housing Choice vouchers, HUD's budget needs at least \$600 million more.

Housing advocates say they are often frustrated by the government's reluctance to invest in housing.

In the face of faltering funding, said Joe Myer, the executive director of the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor, the state's role will be more important than ever.

"As the federal government retreats, the state government will need to play a larger role in financing and funding affordable housing," he said.

In the meantime, Gray, like thousands of others statewide, can't afford a home to call her own. Government programs told her she'd have to wait, and she decided she just didn't have the time.

"The difference between finding affordable housing and getting where you want your family to be is education," she said.

Contact Rachael Jackson at 856-7373 or rjackson@delawareonline.com.