

Features

Lack of affordable housing puts families at risk

By Lee Strong

ROCHESTER: 2 bdrm apt. Furnace in middle of kitchen, thermostat broken. Nails sticking up where carpet was removed. Rat infested. Toilet does not flush, seal broken, water leaking. \$275+; \$350+ with working stove and refrigerator.

Who would answer such an ad?

Melissa Smith (who asked that her real name not be used) had no choice. Recently moved to Rochester, pregnant, unemployed, desperate to find shelter for her children and herself, she moved into an apartment like this with her son and daughter, aged 10 and three. She later brought her newborn child home to the apartment, and another young woman and her son later moved in with Smith and her family to help with the new baby.

Donna Ecker, co-director of Bethany House — where Smith had lived for three weeks prior to renting the apartment — accompanied the young mother and her day-old daughter from the hospital to the apartment.

"The lights weren't working except for one in the kitchen, so we were going up the stairs in the pitch dark carrying the bassinet with the baby in it," Ecker said. Nails protruded from the walls in the narrow stairway, and the carpet was loose on the steps. In the apartment, Ecker opened a kitchen cabinet and watched four rats run across the shelves. Because Smith didn't have a refrigerator, she kept the baby's formula on the kitchen window.

A nurse from the hospital visited the Smiths on October 12, and was so shocked by what she saw that she called Smith's case worker at the Monroe County Department of Social Services (DSS).

The case worker moved the family out of the apartment that very day and into a house DSS rented at Lewis Street Settlement. DSS gave Smith until October 26 to find another apartment. She has already moved five times in the last six months. As of October 21, she had yet to locate a place she could afford, despite daily calls to landlords and reading the classified ads.

"If I don't find a place by the first (of November), then I'm going back (to Connecticut)," Smith said. "I can't keep going through these changes. It's put my kids through a lot of changes."

A number of low-income families whom Ecker encounters through Bethany House, a shelter for women with children who have been forced to leave their homes, are forced to live in substandard apartments. Smith's was the worst that Ecker had seen. As was the case in Smith's apartment, families frequently double up to help pay the rent and to care for their children, or simply because few apartments for low-income families are available in Rochester.

Like Smith, women are becoming trapped in a cycle of poverty and public assistance — a cycle that's beginning to continue into second and third generations, Ecker noted. Unable to escape from their circumstances because they lack money, education and marketable job

skills, many such single-parent families are at risk of becoming homeless. Some do end up on the streets.

A study released earlier this year by the Mental Health Association's Task Force on the Homeless revealed that in a 12-month period between late 1986 and late 1987, 450 families and 850 children sought shelter in a homeless facility in Rochester. The study concluded that families are among the fastest growing group of homeless people, and account for approximately one-third of the homeless population.

The numbers could easily increase, noted Linda Berger, director of the Rochester Housing Council.

"I think that every low-income renter is at risk at one time or another simply because their landlord sells to a new landlord, the rent goes up and they get evicted," Berger said. "For single women, it's just more difficult. They may not have a regular income, and they have other problems that make their lives more tenuous."

Berger estimated that as many as 30,000 single-parent families in Rochester alone live at risk of becoming homeless.

Many of these single-parent families are forced to accept substandard apartments because there are few alternatives for them, noted Mary Dickerson, supervisor of inner city services for the Catholic Family Center.

"A lot of times, they've had changed income," Dickerson said. "Some families that did have stable incomes have lost them because of lay-offs, companies moving, separation of families."

The at-risk population includes a substantial number of the working poor, as well as people who are on public assistance, Dickerson said. When those on public assistance receive periodic increases in housing allowances, she noted, landlords raise rents.

Dickerson pointed to a further potential threat to the housing situation in Rochester: the loss of subsidized housing units built in the 1960 and 1970s with joint federal and private money. Under the terms of the federal housing programs that provided loans to finance the projects, these projects were to consist of or include subsidized units for low-income families for a set period of time — generally 40 years — but the owners have the option of buying out the loan at the end of 20 years.

Over the next few years, the agreements covering a number of these projects will elapse, and the landlords may begin to raise rents substantially. Meanwhile, Dickerson noted, the federal government in the last few years has stopped funding such projects, and the number of existing subsidized units remains insufficient to meet the demand.

Facilities and agencies that house homeless families in Monroe County report that the number of families seeking emergency shelter has increased in recent years.

In the county, DSS has emergency housing to accommodate approximately 19 families, depending on the number of children involved.



Linda Dow-Hayes/Courier-Journal
Rosemary Hamer and her family (pictured here with her granddaughter Tiesha and daughter Akisha) are among the many considered at risk of losing their housing.

DSS will also rent motel rooms for families if their numbers exceed the available number of units. Families are allowed to stay in such accommodations approximately two weeks. Alternatives for Battered Women has a 26-bed shelter in which families are allowed to stay as long as 30 days. But the shelter is only open to women who have been victims of physical abuse by a spouse or partner.

Bethany House can house approximately six women and children, though the number can be extended, depending on the ages (and sizes) of the children. A few weeks ago, for example, a woman with six children stayed for several days. Women at Bethany are limited to three-week stays, though recently some women have been allowed to stay longer because of the lack of alternative housing.

Both Bethany House and Alternatives for Battered Women are currently operating at full capacity. The Department of Social Services has been consistently housing between 15 and 20 families a month.

Meanwhile no agencies in Rochester currently offer long-term, transitional shelter for families. Sojourner House used to provide three to six months of shelter for up to 15 women with one child each, but the facility was closed in August, 1987, because of a fire. Sojourner House will open a new 21-room shelter in the former St. Monica's Convent by early February. But until then, families must survive on their own.

Rosemary Hamer was a certified home-health aide until she was injured on the job five years ago. Her injury left her partially disabled, and thus unable to work. She had to go on welfare.

Hamer soon discovered that welfare payments were not enough to support her and four children. She was unable to keep up with her bills — including certain medical costs related to her injury, which were not covered by Medicaid.

Desperate, Hamer began to steal. She was eventually arrested and went to jail. "I hated to do what I did," the mother of four said, "but I did it for my kids. When they asked me what I did with the money, I said 'shopping for food and clothes for my kids.'"

Her arrest, Hamer said, made her feel "less than a mother. I disappointed my children by going to jail."

During her incarceration, she lost her house and all her furniture. When she was released

from jail in March, she stayed at Bethany House. She moved out when she found an apartment, but soon discovered that her new home was across the street from a drug house, and that several other drug houses were on her block.

Meanwhile, Hamer has had problems with the apartment and the landlord, whom she said she hasn't seen in five months. The kitchen floor had a hole in it through which, Hamer said, she could see the basement. When she complained to the landlord, a workman came and patched the hole with a sheet of tin — on which one of Hamer's daughters later cut her foot. A light upstairs remains unused because the fixture sparks when the light is turned on. When Hamer rented the apartment, the landlord promised to bring over supplies so that Hamer's son could paint. Six months have passed since the promise, and Hamer has yet to see the paint.

Hamer's rent is \$450 a month.

She is now looking for a new apartment, in part because of the neighborhood, and in part because her son will be moving out eventually — as her oldest daughter already has. When he moves, Hamer's housing allowance will drop to \$302.

"DSS is not going to pay \$500 for a mother to have two children," Hamer said. "They'll tell you to find a place for \$350, \$375. Where am I going to find a good place for that?"

Some solutions to the housing crunch for low-income families are on the horizon. Sojourner House will be reopening, and a new shelter, Women's Place, is scheduled to open in April of 1989 at St. Augustine's Parish. Housing Opportunities, the development arm of the Housing Council, is in the process of converting the old Susan B. Anthony School on Central Park into 36 apartments for low-income families, and will soon start renovation of St. Peter and Paul School.

More such projects are needed to meet the demand, Berger said. But, she noted, new projects will not solve the current housing problem. From the planning stage to the point when units are available for rent, such projects generally take two years.

"We need to increase our supply of adequate, low-income housing, but none of (the solutions) are easy," Berger said. "None of them are quick. None will ever solve the problem completely. There are never enough dollars. We can just try to make progress."



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