

LOCAL

Livingston's lack of affordable housing: Waitlists, evictions and tough choices

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In May, Phil Ross' longtime girlfriend Sharon Winn died. Now, four months later, the 68-year-old may lose his home.

Ross and Winn lived in a Brighton apartment with their dog Elle, prior to Winn's death. Rent is \$750 a month, something that was manageable with two incomes. It's now undoable for Ross on his \$1,000 a month Social Security stipend.

"Basically I can pay the rent, but not the utilities. I am in a bad position," he said. "I can continue to do that for a little while but don't know for how long."

Ross began the search for less costly housing in Livingston County soon after Winn's death. After months of calls and searching, he still hasn't found a place.

"I made at least 50 phone calls and inquiries into various apartments. No luck at all so far," Ross said. "I am on waiting lists that are years long."

Several nonprofits, including Catholic Charities, have helped Ross with rent, but that's not a viable long-term solution. Without their help, Ross will be evicted.

"If they evict him, he is literally going to be homeless," said Beth Newman, who works for Livingston County Catholic Charities. "He will be living in his truck, under a bridge or somebody will put him up at the Kensington Inn and he will be paying an astronomical amount."

Ross is not alone in his struggles, Newman said.

The organization receives calls regularly asking for low-income housing options.

Unfortunately there aren't many, she said.

'It's here and it's rampant'

It is not just seniors who are struggling to afford housing in Livingston County.

A 2020 study the Livingston County Homeless Continuum of Care commissioned found 45% of households in the county are housing-cost burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. About 20% of households spend more than 50% of their income on housing.

Of the 191,995 residents living Livingston County, 7,679 live in poverty, according to U.S. Census 2019 American Community Survey.

The poverty level for an individual is \$12,800 per year, according to federal guidelines. It's \$26,500 for a family of four.

"People look at Livingston County and don't see the homeless situation. It's here and rampant," Newman said. "They see downtown Howell, they see downtown Brighton, they see downtown Hartland," she said. "They don't look beyond that."

The demand for affordable housing is ticking up not only in Livingston County but across the country, Brad Michaud, CFO at Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency, said.

"There is a need everywhere," he said. "Livingston County isn't unique."

OLSHA currently has 33 housing units in the county between Fowlerville and Brighton through its Venture, Inc. program, OLHSA's affordable housing subsidiary.

"Affordable housing is really targeted to people who are working in your community," he said. "Restaurant employees, or employees in retail stores. It's targeted for people who are working on a day in, day out basis.

"It's for people that are already living in your community except they are barely scraping by, with some wondering where they are coming to rest their heads every night," Michaud said.

Lack of housing

Less than 2% of Livingston County's 77,728 housing units are geared toward low-income families, according to data from the Census Bureau.

"I think the bottom line is there is not enough housing, period," Livingston County Community Mental Health Director Connie Conklin said. "There really isn't enough

affordable housing. A lot of new housing tends to be out of market for a lot of the folks that we may serve."

There are 559 homes or apartments listed as Section 8 housing in Livingston County, according to data from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. An additional 470 apartments fall under the low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) program.

To qualify for Section 8 housing, the family's income may not exceed 50% of the median income for the county, according to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. To qualify for a housing tax credit, family's income cannot exceed 60% of the median income.

For those living in Livingston County, that means they must earn less than \$42,110 each year for Section 8 and \$50,532 a year for LIHTC. Livingston's median income is \$84,221.

Conklin said there is often a stigma around affordable housing.

"If you say affordable housing, what does that mean to people?" she said. "Affordable housing: it could be your kid, it could be your family member, it could be your friend that can't afford it. I think sometimes people have an image of what that means and it's not a fair image."

Affordable housing is scattered across the county with a large percentage located in Howell, including 240 apartments in the Lakeshore Village apartment complex.

"These units are restricted to families whose gross income does not exceed 50% or 60% of the area median income for Livingston County, Chris Bromley, regional manager for Lockwood Management LLC, said in an email. "This does not necessarily mean the rent is affordable, but the units are only available to people who do not exceed these income limits."

Bromley said the rates continuously change but in August the cost of a two-bedroom apartment costs around \$1,290 with a three-bedroom apartment costing around \$1,400.

Union at Oak Grove, a proposed apartment complex in Howell Township, could bring more affordable units in the coming years.

About 60% of the 220 apartments would be affordable units as defined by the Michigan State Housing and Development Authority. They would be backed by federal subsidies that give renters a break on rent based on their income.

Some of the apartments could be priced as low as \$661 a month, based on the renter's income, according to the proposal.

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