

Rent prices have soared by 15% in Brevard and some are a paycheck away from homelessness

By Isadora Rangel
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Cynthia Moses was on the brink of homelessness for four years after losing a job at a hospice and being evicted. She bounced between the homes of seven friends until finally in June she found a place in Cocoa she could afford for \$600 a month.

One emergency, a job loss or a rent increase and Moses, who now earns \$10.75 per hour working at a dry cleaner, could lose her home again.

Being one paycheck away from homelessness is common for many Americans and that issue could become worse in Brevard County, known for its affordability compared to other parts of Florida. Rent prices soared by 15 percent compared to last year, an unprecedented increase. In the previous five years, rents went up by no more than 5 percent, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

With the fair market value of a one-bedroom home now at \$803 (actual prices may vary), many leaders are sounding the alarm about an affordable housing crisis that might overwhelm charities that help the homeless and even our government.

Brevard's homeless student population has jumped by 30 percent since the last school year because of rising housing prices and a lack of drop-in shelters, Brevard Public Schools homeless liaison Sally Shinn told me. With 2,907 so-called "students in transition," Shinn emphasized this is a crisis with an all-caps response to my email asking if we had made any progress since the last time I wrote about homelessness in November:

"Isadora... NO IT IS NOT LOOKING BETTER!"

"Affordable housing crisis" has become a buzz word in recent years. There are more than 911,000 very low-income households in Florida that pay more than 50 percent of their income on housing, according to the Florida Housing Coalition. That's way above the recommended 30 percent. On the Space Coast, we need about 11,500 new housing units for people who earn \$18,450 to \$24,600 for a family of four, according to a 2016 study by the Shimberg Center for Housing Studies at the University of Florida.

All of this is made worse because the Legislature for years has been raiding the state's affordable housing trust funds to plug budget holes. Money from those trust funds is distributed to Florida communities — Brevard is projected to receive \$858,000 this year — and can be used to help homeowners pay for closing costs and down payments and to help people pay first, last and security deposits for rent.

Many of us don't think of people like Moses, the working poor, when we hear about homelessness — I didn't until I began reporting on this topic. They might not drag a shopping cart with their belongings around town or sleep on sidewalks. They often stay with relatives and friends or sleep in their cars.

Changing perceptions is why Charlotte Perkins, director of the nonprofit My Community Cares introduced me to Moses. Perkins helps people in her community find a place to live and her charity has recently launched a program to build homes in Cocoa for single moms. Meanwhile Perkins herself has struggled to find affordable housing. Her 31-year-old daughter had to move in with her after her landlord raised her rent, bringing along two granddaughters.

"These are people who are employed but it's just that it's not enough," Perkins told me. "One paycheck, an emergency, can mess everything up."

The Space Coast is experiencing prosperous times thanks to the growth of our commercial space and technology industries and the influx of high-paid professionals. Home values, as in the rest of the state, are rising. Most of the new construction we're seeing is not geared toward low-income residents, Mike Artelli, president of the Space Coast

Association of Realtors, told me. A new one-bedroom apartment in Viera, for example, can go for as much as \$1,400 a month, he said.

So how do we prevent our affordable housing shortage from getting worse?

Brevard County has some initiatives in place: developers that add affordable units to their projects are allowed to build at higher density and the county has given grants to developers that build affordable units, county spokesman Don Walker said. The charity Housing for Homeless and community leaders are in the early stages of a task force to find ways to increase affordable housing.

There's much more governments can do, said Jaimie Ross, CEO of the Florida Housing Coalition. They can:

- Expedite permits for affordable housing and for small homes;
- Require affordable housing be built concurrently with the development of market rate housing;
- Make surplus government-owned property available for the development of affordable homes.

Here's one thing you can do: contact your state lawmakers and ask them to keep Florida's affordable housing trust funds intact and dedicated only to housing. You can find who your legislators are at bit.ly/321lawmakers. You can also visit the Sadowski Housing Coalition's [website](#) for more information.

You might know a person or two who's one rent increase away from not having a home.

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