

## Opinion

# OUR VIEW: Housing needs demand attention

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**If workers can't find affordable, safe housing, they might not stick around.**

Local real-estate prices are booming. Local wages aren't. And that, in a nutshell, is the problem confronting people who work low-paying, demanding jobs in Volusia and Flagler counties, but can't really afford to live here.

The burden of housing is becoming heavier for thousands of hardworking residents — the servers hoisting trays of hamburgers and beer; the health aides caring for seniors in nursing homes; the headset-wearing customer-service agents in local call centers. But they aren't the only ones suffering; the burden hits their employers as well. Many local businesses depend on workers who earn less than \$15 an hour, but if those workers can't find affordable, safe housing, they might not stick around. And those who do try to make ends meet may sometimes buckle under the pressure.

That's why the new focus by the Daytona Beach Regional Chamber of Commerce is so laudable. Many business organizations might simply revel in the fact that Volusia County is one of the nation's hottest housing markets. But the chamber is looking beyond the hordes of comfortable people buying beach homes or moving into communities like Latitude Margaritaville. They see the police officers and first-year teachers who can't afford to buy homes. They see the workers holding two or three jobs who still can't manage the average \$970 monthly rent on an apartment.

These people fall into a category that the United Way refers to as "ALICE" — which stands for "asset limited, income constrained, employed." The ALICE population makes enough to keep them above the poverty line, but not enough to meet the expected costs of daily living, including housing. An estimated 28 percent of Volusia County households, and 35 percent of Flagler County households, fall into this category — and that's as of 2015. Since then, housing prices have kept zooming upward; local officials say it's likely that a survey today would put thousands more families under the ALICE designation.

Chamber officials are still working on their plan to tackle a problem they're calling "workforce housing." But priorities are already emerging.

The first challenge is to convince Florida lawmakers to stop raiding a trust fund established to encourage development of low-income housing. Florida's 25-year-old Sadowski State and Local Trust Funds support affordable housing in several ways, including assistance for first-time homebuyers and incentives for developers who build affordable rental housing. But in recent years, lawmakers have siphoned hundreds of



millions of dollars from the fund, redirecting the money to other priorities. The impact is showing in the number of affordable housing units across the state, which have actually dwindled by nearly 60,000 since 1993, according to the Florida Housing Finance Corporation. The chamber is joining the growing number of local governments and business organizations urging lawmakers not to raid the fund in 2019. The Legislature should dedicate the entire \$314 million to affordable housing activities.

Beyond that, local leaders must work to encourage the construction of housing that low-wage workers can afford. That can be a challenge; in Palm Coast, for example, the term “affordable housing” has become a red flag, signaling protests from residents angry about the prospect of “ghettos” impacting their home values. That’s a cruel myth, and Palm Coast is not the only city suffering from that mindset. Local governments must do a better job of convincing their residents that affordable housing translates into a better quality of life for everyone in a community.

That’s why the chamber’s leadership is such a breath of fresh air. It’s far too easy to overlook the plight of those residents of Volusia and Flagler counties working long hours at low-paying jobs — but the long-term strength of this area’s economy is resting, in large part, on their backs. Giving them more options makes sense — not just for their benefit, but for the health of the community as a whole.