

## Orlando city commissioner, now Florida League of Cities President, to lead fight against preemption

By Karla Ray | December 2, 2020

**OSCEOLA COUNTY, Fla.** — It was a problem before the pandemic, only made worse with so many people out of work and unable to pay their rent and mortgage: providing enough affordable housing options to those who need it in Central Florida.

A new report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that between 400,000 and 900,000 Floridians could face eviction once a nationwide moratorium expires at the end of the month.

Channel 9 investigative reporter Karla Ray checked in with local leaders to see whether efforts being made before COVID-19 can still happen as more people live on the bubble of homelessness.

Despite no power and no water, about two dozen people still call the Star Motel in Osceola County home.

“You walk through the hotel, and you see there’s a mess, but here’s the thing; I have a roof over my head here,” Star Motel resident Sarah Russo said.

One county over, along a once-bustling I-Drive, a hotel usually filled with tourists has also become a temporary home for many, including Charlotte “Cha Cha” Davis.

“People are stuck in these situations, out on the streets, in these hotels, because there’s nowhere for them to go,” Davis said.

Both women, on the brink of homelessness, know firsthand the struggle to find an affordable place to live in Central Florida.

It’s something that was the focus of local leaders pre-pandemic, and still is.

“I am extremely concerned, every day,” Osceola Commission Chairwoman Viviana Janer said.

Leaders from all over Central Florida continue toward solutions, despite budget concerns amid COVID-19.

In Osceola, plans are moving forward to turn 82 acres near the Poinciana SunRail station into affordable housing units.

In Orange County, an affordable housing trust fund plan was approved by commissioners in September, laying out how \$33 million would be spent over the next three years.

“Even with a pandemic, it’s still out there for us, it’s still an issue,” Orange County Housing and Community Development Manager Mitchell Glasser said. “We have been hit, but the board really still feels like it’s very important for us to tackle the affordable housing issues.”

Diversifying the housing stock is part of the long-term plan to get more people into more affordable housing. Leaders are reworking zoning ordinances to allow for different types of housing to be built with that plan in mind.

“We had a tremendous need before the pandemic, a growing need here in the community,” Orlando Housing and Community Development director Oren Henry said.

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But a major expected boost in funding this year was held back. The Sadowski Fund provides money for affordable housing programs, and for the first time those funds were to be released to local governments in full, but they were instead held back because of budgetary concerns at the start of the pandemic.

“We were very excited, we were going to get over \$3 million for Orlando, which would be very helpful in addressing the problems here,” Henry said.

Each leader we spoke with hoped lawmakers would allow those funds to be released in the upcoming legislative session, for a problem that has become even worse.

“We need to encourage our legislators to release those Sadowski funds. It’s going to be a critical component to move forward and continue our development process,” Seminole County Community Services Director Allison Thall said.

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