

## Partners for Affordable Housing: Pandemic exacerbates housing struggles

Becky Asleson

May 18, 2020

---



Becker

**W**here people live affects all parts of their lives.

It affects access to food, transportation, health care, safety, employment, education and more – and can determine whether families thrive. In many communities across the state, including southern Minnesota, affordable housing is lacking. This makes it difficult for some Minnesotans to keep up with all living expenses, including rent.

The government's Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines cost-burdened households as those “who pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing” and “may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and medical care.” Severe rent burden is defined as paying more than 50 percent of one's

income on rent. Housing instability affects more than one-fourth of Minnesota households. Nicollet and Blue Earth Counties are considered “cost-burdened” and “severely cost-burdened”, respectively.

For those who work service-oriented jobs, such as food service, cleaning homes, childcare, retail, nursing homes or home health care, they do not earn a living wage with benefits. When a child is sick or transportation is an issue, earning that wage becomes difficult, and this puts an enormous strain on the families.

When money is tight, being able to afford housing becomes a hurdle. If people don't have savings from which to draw, and they're not able to pay their rent, eviction looms and can lead to potential homelessness.

Partners for Affordable Housing (PAH) offers a temporary, hand-up approach as the staff works to help people experiencing homelessness overcome these burdens. With its two shelters emergency shelters in Mankato and the newest shelter Union Street Place in St Peter, housing is available for up to 90 days, and guests are expected to pay a nominal fee (\$15 to \$25) each week toward their stay. While there, housing advocates engage with guests to help them overcome some of the barriers that led to housing instability, usually having to do with finding jobs, finding and applying for more affordable housing, childcare solutions, or behavioral health needs.

“It's a very vicious cycle,” stated Holland Petersen, a housing advocate for PAH, “because when people have been evicted, it becomes much more difficult for them to find their next place to stay, regardless of the reason. I have seen some victims of domestic violence become evicted or fined because there was a zero-tolerance policy for violence. Because they were involved in the violent situation, regardless of their culpability, they are held responsible by the landlord.”

Add to the pot: COVID-19. Sheltering in place and socially distancing is a hassle for most of us, but when an entire family must live in a very small private area in a shelter amongst other families, their ability to socially distance is challenging and isolating.

Even more difficult is maintaining income when restaurants, childcare, retail and more places are closed. While deemed non-essential jobs, the livelihood of many people has been disrupted and income reduced or eliminated.

On a positive note, with the help of PAH staff, several families have recently moved or are in the process of moving to permanent housing. In addition to successfully securing permanent housing, this movement creates space for other families to stay. It is a reluctant prediction that more people will be evicted due to inability to pay as the economic effects of COVID-19 continue.

The PAH team continues to tap into their creative problem-solving skills to support guests in several new ways.

- Firstly, they have been creatively filling food gaps. They have supplemented the free food available in the community with healthy pantry and freezer items. Two churches have recently donated money to be spent on food and kitchen improvements, and one person donated his family's stimulus check toward the purchase of grocery gift cards. Other community members have donated homemade meals for all residents at Union Street Place.

- Secondly, PAH staff have assisted parents with distance learning, as some parents find it challenging to navigate technology or the educational materials.

- Thirdly, shelter staff have been hyper-vigilant with keeping common areas sanitized and safe and have been mentoring social distancing and cleaning techniques.

Despite challenges in the day-to-day life of PAH communities, maintaining safe and stable housing is the goal. Partners for Affordable Housing continues to support people in need, connect them to resources, encourage them, and keep them in safe housing until the clients find permanent options, giving them hope for a better life to come.

---

Kirsten Becker is the communications manager for Partners for Affordable Housing, which works on housing issues in the area, including Nicollet, Le Sueur and Blue Earth counties.

---

Becky Asleson