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Trapped in a motel way of life

Vicious circle: With weekly rent payments and rising housing costs, many residents cannot save enough to move into cheaper apartments

By JAMES RAMAGE and CHRISTOPHER MOSS/Staff Writer

There are two beds, a small bathroom and a kitchen that doubles as an eating area for the eight people who live there.

The kitchen stove has four burners, but only one knob.

A fork operates the light switch in the bathroom, which is on a timer. There is no living room and only a few chairs perched atop the dingy carpet.

The view out the back is of some old beat-up cars -- at least that was the view before the manager sealed shut the back door. Some new playground equipment sits near the old cars, but the five children who live in the room are not allowed to play on it. Management's rules.

Regina Hines said she pays \$332 each week -- or \$1,328 a month -- to live there, one of 20 units at the Apple Valley Motel at Highway 18 and Kiowa Road in Apple Valley. That's a monthly rental nearly twice the price of nearby two-bedroom apartments.

"At times it's rough," said Hines, who has lived in the motel since April. "If I weren't in church praying, I don't know how I'd make it. I wasn't raised this way. Things are just real tight."

Hines and the four generations of her relatives who live there are among an increasing number of High Desert residents who make their homes in a motel, social workers and academics say.

As housing prices and rental rates rise faster than wages, more people with little education, few skills, bad credit and who are unemployed or work low-paying jobs are spending what little they have each month to put the roof of a motel room over their heads.

The cost to the community can be high. Many residents living in motels are on public assistance, so taxpayers often foot the bill. And because of their circumstances and the high rental costs, residents don't find a way to support themselves or are unable to move.

The Hines household receives \$1,626 a month -- \$836 from Aid for Dependent Children and \$790 from Regina Hines' mother's Social Security check. Hines received \$404 a month in disability pay for a bad knee, but that assistance lasted only a year, she said.

Kevin Patel, manager of the motel, defended the high rents he charges tenants. He said overhead costs are high for the motel and that he cannot afford to charge lower rental rates normally associated with apartments.

Patel said he has to respond to problems immediately and change the linens of each room twice a week. He said property taxes, electricity and water all have to be paid by management, resulting in guests paying a higher price than they would pay for an apartment or a house.

"This is a temporary place, and so, it's expensive," Patel said. "But (guests) don't need to worry about anything, it's all included."

Little breathing room

Hines shares the motel room with five of her daughter's children and her mother. Sometimes a cousin stays with them.

The children are all under age 10. Their mother spent several months in jail and then worked at a topless bar in Hesperia. Hines said that her daughter fell in with a bad crowd, so she decided to take care of the children.

"There's no extra anything," said Hines, who says she has \$150 to spend on the kids after paying the rent, storage costs and other minor expenses.

In August, Hines went school shopping for the children, \$30 for each. But she wasn't able to buy everything, and one boy went without new shoes. She ended up short on rent.

The last time she fell short on rent, her belongings were left outside their room, Hines said. She was a day late.

"That's the scary part about wondering whether to buy some clothes or not," Hines said.

She once had an apartment lined up in Adelanto for \$550 a month but things fell through when the apartment building sold.

Motel living can be dangerous

Motels can be dangerous, filled with drug dealers and prostitutes, said Janine Ingram, the executive director of OC Partnership, a homeless services advocacy agency based in Orange.

It's difficult for families living in a motel to eat properly, said Lois Fox of Samaritan's Helping Hand, a Victorville organization that provides food and services to the needy. Rarely are motel facilities equipped with much more than a microwave oven and a small refrigerator, she said.

"It's just a heat-and-eat type situation," Fox said. "No dishes. No silverware."

There's also the "car Catch-22," Fox said. Families are typically bound to public transportation, borrowing rides from friends or walking, as hardly any can afford to have a car, she said.

"It's impossible to get a job up here without a car, and that means registration and insurance," she said. "How can you pay for that without a job?"

Research lags the problem

Julie Speia, with Housing California, said research lags on long-term motel living.

The OC Partnership is conducting a group study on the topic. The organization is studying motel life in Anaheim and taking a sample size of 1,000 rooms for the report, expected to be released next year.

"We've always had some portion of people that are living in hotels," Ingram said. "I think that the concern right now is the sheer numbers of people."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau report for the year 2000, the number of people living in emergency transitional shelters -- which includes motels -- was 170,706, of which 27,701 were Californians.

In the report, emergency transitional shelters are defined as "shelters for children who are runaways, neglected or without conventional housing; transitional shelters for people without conventional housing, and hotels and motels used to provide people shelter for people without conventional housing."

The state's housing problem can be ascribed to three factors, according to Steven Frates, a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

First, the state was short almost 275,000 housing units in 1989 -- a shortage that is more acute today, Frates said.

Second, the Pete Wilson administration shifted property taxes away from cities and counties and over to schools, leaving cities with little incentive to build low-cost housing, he said.

Finally, years of redevelopment wiped out much of the state's supply of older, and more decrepit, low-cost housing, Frates said.

Those factors, placed alongside the rapid erosion of manufacturing jobs at which low-skilled workers once could earn a living, have combined to leave the working poor in desperate straits, Frates said.

"You slam the door, and it hurts the guy barely making it through the worst," Frates said.

Arnquist said that even though San Bernardino County has the most affordable rents in Southern California, they're still not affordable for a low-income family.

According to Susie Hollenbeck, executive director of High Desert Homeless Services Inc., in Victorville, it's difficult to find a Victor Valley apartment for less than \$700 a month. And the rising rents have increased the number of people knocking on her organization's door seeking temporary housing.

Hollenbeck said the shelter housed almost 900 people last year from throughout the Victor Valley, Barstow and the unincorporated county areas. The number of people requesting shelter in 2003 rose by 30 percent over 2002, and a 50 percent increase was seen in 2002 over 2001, she said.

The shelter supervisor estimated that up to 45 percent of the people staying there go on to a motel after they leave. Displaced Victor Valley residents can stay at the shelter for a maximum of 90 days, Hollenbeck said.

End of the road?

"I know that, for lots of people, (motels are) where they end up," said Jeanette Arnquist, director of the office of social concerns for the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino.

Ingram said the OC Partnership found that a surprising number of people end up in motels because they become ill or are injured. People may have been living in an apartment, were injured, applied for disability and then were evicted from their apartment because it takes so long for disability to arrive, Ingram said.

Eviction leads to bad credit, which makes it harder to qualify for traditional home rentals.

Racism can also pin families to motels, Arnquist, said.

Sabrina Powell, who lived in the Green Spot Motel on C Street in Victorville, said she and her husband, Darren, were kicked out of their apartment in Riverside because of a racist manager.

Powell received \$790 in Social Security income and \$368 in welfare income, while her husband looks for a job and she looks for an apartment.

They're also trying to save for a car, she said.

The room they lived in was similar in size to Hines' Apple Valley room. Clothes, books and food were neatly organized, but greatly limited the open space in their room.

The Powells paid \$740 a month for the room. She said the main thing that keeps them out of an apartment is the cost of the first month's rent and a deposit.

It's the reason why many motel residents are stuck.