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Michael Johnson: Tight market, tough rental laws hurt the homeless

MICHAEL JOHNSON Jul 30, 2016



Johnson

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In response to the State Journal's heart-wrenching story "3 adults, 8 children, 1 motel room," about a homeless family of 11 living in a local motel, the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County did what we could to lend a helping hand.

The club hired one of the teenagers, provided food to the family, and connected the family with a local church that's trying to find them permanent housing. But this temporary help only scratches the surface and desperately needs improvement.

It's hard to believe we have almost 1,400 kids in Madison who are experiencing homelessness. How do we expect low-income kids to perform well in school while facing these kinds of barriers? How can we accept living in "one of the best places in America," yet the average age of a homeless person is 8 years old? Housing insecurity has reached epic proportions, and I'm finding myself turning away more people than I'm helping. It hurts.

My heart goes out to single mothers whose families are doubling up in motels because they can't find permanent housing. My heart aches for kids who are enduring these hardships because we have not properly prepared for population growth and housing shortages as we evolve into a larger, more complex city.

Nonprofits such as the YWCA, Project Babies, Madison Area Urban Ministry, The Road Home, Salvation Army, Porchlight and others have provided help for many people who face homelessness. But these agencies are underfunded and struggle to handle our city's growing needs.

Many factors, including economic gentrification and high-end developments, have led to historically high rents that continue to rise, while vacancy rates in recent years have reached historic lows. If rent is \$900 a month and that person is making \$10 an hour, that person is spending more than 60 percent of his or her income on rent, which makes it very challenging to survive. Add dependent children to the mix, and it becomes impossible.

Nearly 100 changes have recently been made to rental laws, which have decimated protections for renters. Eviction laws allow landlords to evict tenants within five days, dispose of their property, and charge them with trespassing if they come back to retrieve it. There's really no protection whatsoever for low-income families to avoid homelessness.

I also know good landlords who try to help. But when people are not paying rent and landlords can't pay their mortgage(s), something has to give.

The housing crisis comes down to the economic and racial disparities that exist. Not having gainful employment affects a family's ability to pay rent, which in turn destroys the family's credit and prevents it from securing housing.

In the seven years I've lived in Madison, I've never received so many requests for help — back to back to back — like I do now. The Boys and Girls Club will do whatever we can to assist and will always try to give families a hand up. But we ultimately need to address the criminalization of those in poverty and find a permanent solution to housing insecurity.

Johnson is CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County.

WEB EXTRA

To read the State Journal's ongoing series "Homeless in Madison | A City Challenged," see statistics, videos and learn how to help, go to go.madison.com/homeless.