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Seeking shelter, poor families turn motels into homes

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When Jim and Cora Brown called the Ray Motel on Division Street their home, they and their two children were crammed into a room with one queen-sized bed, a refrigerator and a range.

A sink and counter with cupboards lined the back wall. A small bathroom was next to the tile-covered kitchen area. There was one window, and an air-conditioning unit filled up half that space.

"Ninety-five dollars a week for the room and I don't make a lot and what I make, what's left over, is enough to get the food and take care of the kids," said Brown, a truck driver.

As Brown spoke, his 5-year-old daughter pedaled a tricycle in circles on the tile strip next to the sink. His 2-year-old son went to the refrigerator and pulled out a cold hot dog to eat.

"There's no playground here," Brown said. "The swimming pool is full of dirt with a satellite dish stuck in it. I want to get something better but right now it's just real hard to do."

Along Division Street, places like the Ray, Lester and OK motels and the Kensington and Kings inns provide temporary homes for transient families like the Browns, said officials with several agencies that help the families. At least 40 children and their families live in the motels along Division Street, according to figures from the Arlington school district's free-lunch program.

Some motel residents say they lost their jobs and were evicted from apartments, houses and mobile homes. Others said they moved to Arlington to be near relatives or to find better jobs. They got a motel room for what they thought would be a few weeks and found themselves staying several months. The families regularly move from one motel to another, looking for a cheaper rate or a nicer room.

"Some of them double and triple up; they're kind of the invisible homeless," said Larry Johnson, executive director of the Arlington Night Shelter. "It's interesting. Those places are needed but you wish to God they weren't needed."

Like many families who have extended stays in motels, the Browns have moved on.

Families that live from motel to motel are difficult to help because they are difficult to find, agency representatives said. They move often. Some of the motel residents almost shuttle back and forth from motels to the Arlington Night Shelter for the homeless. And because of their transience, they frequently don't qualify for state and federal aid, agency representatives said.

For a year, Debra Lee and her five children called a one-bedroom motel unit on Division Street home.

"We stayed at the Mayflower and it was just me and the kids and we stayed in one room with two beds," Lee said.

Today, Lee, her children and her husband, who has been working as a warehouse foreman, live in a three-bedroom apartment. She still gets food donations to help feed her children every month, but in the past month she managed to put enough money down to get telephone service.

"Now I've got room to move about," Lee said of her apartment, where she and her family have lived for several years since leaving the motel.

In the past five years, about one-third of the motel families have worked their way out of the motels and into more stable homes. The rest don't. And other families always appear at the motels, replacing the ones that make it out, said Tillie Burgin, executive director of Mission Arlington, a nonprofit private agency that started as an outreach of First Baptist Church to help Arlington's poor and homeless.

Mission Arlington and Arlington Charities both aid the motel families.

Arlington Charities helps with emergency food and clothes and obtains copies of birth certificates and social security cards - items necessary for employment, Executive Director Charlene Duffie said.

Mission Arlington coordinates the school district's free-lunch program for the children in the motels. Volunteers also play games and plan field trips with the children. On Wednesdays, there are lunch and Bible study for the adults and day care for the kids. And there are free care packages of food and clothes.

But sometimes attending the weekly Bible study and lunch at Mission Arlington is difficult, Janie Alaniz said.

"I don't like to go because I see that they look at me like I'm poor," Alaniz said. "Mission Arlington people don't look at you like that but when somebody else comes and serves food, they look at you . . . and I feel like saying, 'Woman, please stop staring at me; I didn't come here just to eat.' "

Until recently, Alaniz, her husband and two children, ages 3 and 11/2, lived in a one-bedroom unit with a kitchenette at the OK Motel. On July 23, a few days after having her third child by emergency Caesarean section, the family boarded a bus to Oklahoma, where relatives live.

When the family moved to Arlington about a year ago from California, they thought that finding good jobs would be easy, Alaniz said.

Instead, they landed in a motel with Alaniz's husband working temporary jobs even though he had graduated from a school for computer technicians, Alaniz said.

"We don't have hardly anything, just each other," she said. "They (the children) can't really go play outside. I would love a house, love anything better than a motel."

But there is little long-term hope, several motel residents said. Many pay as much as \$400 a month in rent for a one-bedroom unit with a kitchenette. They could rent an apartment for that but they find it difficult to save money for a deposit. And often they don't have the necessary credit.

Dennice Mozisek, 24, and her 3-year-old daughter moved into a room at the Kings Inn at the start of summer.

"I've been working at a restaurant but unless you've got a good job and you can save enough money, it's really hard to get out," she said. "I pay \$120 a week, that's just for a refrigerator - kitchenettes are more."

And it's hard to find a job, she said.

"You go apply for a job and you say you live in a motel, then they think you're going to go off and leave."

Mozisek moved out of the Kings Inn within the past few weeks and has not been heard from.

Keeping track of the residents who might need assistance is difficult, said Mike Watson of the Tarrant Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

"They have a hard time making appointments for services because they're so transient. If there's a week to 10-day wait for an appointment, oftentimes they don't show," Watson said. "It's real difficult and with our case-management program, where we're supposed to follow up with somebody for 18 months; if we're working with someone who is going from motel to motel, we lose them."

The motel residents also find it hard to accept aid, Mission Arlington's Burgin said.

"Not everybody wants our help, you know. . . . And sometimes, if they have zero credit references and they've been evicted out of other places, it's kind of hard to get into places. They've got to overcome some bad history sometimes," Burgin said. "The thing I don't want to have happen is somebody to be out there needing help and not knowing that they could get it."

For Debbie Westhoeffter, it's not a case of needing help. She, her husband and five children live in two adjoining units at the Kings Inn.

The family is waiting to buy a house and is saving money until then. They expect to move out in the fall, Westhoeffter said. She added that she is also working for the Kings Inn manager as a favor.

"We just don't want to have to move and then move again," she said.

Her children have money to play at Putt Putt once a week. Her oldest son, 15, is on his school's Student Council and is on the honor roll, she said.

Still, Westhoeffter says her family is the exception in the motels.

"You see a lot of people come and go," she said. ". . . There's just a lot of people that have had a hard time."

Photos

Jerry W. Hoefler

Children dig into box lunches at the OK Motel in

Arlington. The youngsters, who live with their families in motels,

participate in the lunch program provided by Mission Arlington.

Children are returned to the Kensington Hotel after

lunch.

Cora Brown and son Robert, 2, and daughter Jessica, 5,

are pictured when they lived in the Ray Motel.

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