

How a housing shortage is straining communities in rural Alaska

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Adequate housing has been a consistent problem in rural Alaska and the COVID-19 pandemic has made living there even more difficult. Alaska Public Media's Erin McKinstry reports on the housing problem from the city of Shaktoolik.

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Judy Woodruff:

The lack of adequate housing has been a consistent problem in rural Alaska, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made living there even more difficult.

Alaska Public Media's Erin McKinstry reports from the city of Shaktoolik.

Erin McKinstry:

Outside, a winter storm whips through the Northwest Alaska village of Shaktoolik. Inside, Sophia Katchatag unwinds after a long day at work.

The smell of new soup fills her small home, which she shares with her husband and her four kids.

Sophia Katchatag, Alaska Resident:

This is our hallway. This is our room, where we share with the two younger ones.

Erin McKinstry:

Living in such a tight space has been especially difficult during the pandemic, when they have had to stay home during outbreaks.

The Katchatags meet the federal definition of overcrowding. The six of them share just two bedrooms. Their teenage daughter wants her own room. But expanding isn't financially feasible. Statewide, Alaskans are twice as likely to live in an overcrowded household than the national average.

Rates are highest in small rural communities like Shaktoolik, where around 60 percent of residents live in overcrowded conditions. An estimated 400 new homes are needed to meet the need in the region.

Eugene Asicksik, Commissioner, Bering Straits Regional Housing Authority:

And has to be heated.

Erin McKinstry:

Eugene Asicksik is a commissioner for the Bering Straits Regional Housing Authority.

Eugene Asicksik:

We have multiple families living in houses. I think that adds to the social problems.

Erin McKinstry:

Part of the problem is Shaktoolik's geography. The few vacant homes need work because of the harsh climate and substandard construction. And because the town is only accessible by barge or bush plane, high construction costs keep people from building more or renovating.

Eugene Asicksik:

Everything has to be ordered. One sheet of plywood cost you over \$100.

Erin McKinstry:

Financing is difficult too, since most of the land is owned by the village corporation, instead of homeowners. And bank loans are often inaccessible.

Climate change is also eroding buildable land and slowing down economic activities, like crab fishing, which used to provide more jobs in the village.

The region's federally funded tribal housing authority is responsible for the bulk of the town's residential construction. They haven't built here in more than a decade. But thanks in part to federal COVID relief funding, Shaktoolik is getting four new modular houses, which are prebuilt and then transported to their final destination.

That's welcome news for city clerk Isabelle Jackson. Right now, back at home, she shares a hallway with two of her kids. But after almost 10 years of waiting, she's getting a home of her own. She will pay an income-based rent for 25 years, and then own it outright. It's a huge relief.

Isabelle Jackson, City Clerk, Shaktoolik, Alaska:

I started crying. I got quiet. I — tears rolled down my eyes, and just for happiness.

Erin McKinstry:

Like many other residents, she thought about leaving because finding housing is so difficult here. But the subsistence lifestyle and the tight-knit community have kept her.

Isabelle Jackson:

Home is home for me.

Erin McKinstry:

Jackson's future home and three others are sitting in Nome's shipyard until the barge can access Shaktoolik in the spring.

Woman:

There's four right here.

Erin McKinstry:

The Bering Straits Regional Housing Authority is also bringing three more homes to the region, funded in part by the American Rescue Plan and the CARES Act.

Still, it's only a small dent in the problem, says CEO and President Jolene Lyon.

Jolene Lyon, CEO and President, Bering Straits Regional Housing Authority: We don't have the funding. That makes it very difficult and frustrating sometimes, when you know that the need is greater than that.

Erin McKinstry:

For now, Lyon says they will tackle the problem one home at a time.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Erin McKinstry in Shaktoolik, Alaska.

Judy Woodruff:

And thank you for that look at what is going on in rural Alaska.
