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In Anchorage's tight housing market, some families see no clear road out of homelessness

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Richard Brady and Rhonda Tate in their hotel room where they've stayed with six kids for the last two months. Tate says she's been losing weight despite being five months pregnant because the room doesn't have a kitchen. (Photo by Lex Treinen/Alaska Public Media)

On a recent weekday morning, Rhonda Tate sat at a table in the corner of an Anchorage McDonald's, across the street from the Alex Hotel where she lives with her partner and six kids.

She waited for a sausage sandwich. Her doctor recently told her she was losing weight despite being five months pregnant. At the hotel in Spenard, she said, it's hard to get the calories she needs.

"We're a family that is used to eating three meals a day, or whenever we want to eat, we could cook," she said. "And we only have like a little fryer and then a little pot."

For the past two months, the family of eight has lived out of two hotel rooms. There's two queen beds and a bathroom in each room. There's no living room. Instead of a kitchen, there's just a table with a box of soda and some basic groceries. Cardboard boxes line the walls. The family keeps many of their belongings packed in case they have to leave with little notice. That's happened a few times since they moved to Anchorage from Las Vegas about six months ago.

"It makes me feel like we're not in control of anything," said Tate's partner Richard Brady. "And that's not a good feeling for me."

Since getting to town, Brady has worked a number of different places to pay the bills, from a landscaper to the Sullivan Arena homeless shelter to an industrial bread bakery. He recently took a job at the gas station in Girdwood. He'll take a shuttle there five days a week and work nights for \$17 an hour. He said his salary hasn't been enough to support his family and afford a home in the city's expensive housing market.

So they've been stuck in the family shelter system for six months, and they're not sure what else to do.

The city's shelter system serves more than 140 families, according to [the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness](#). Before the pandemic, the city relied on church volunteers to open their doors each night to families during the winter months. But families had to leave during the day.

When the pandemic hit, churches paused the program to protect volunteers, many of whom were older and more at risk of severe illness from COVID-19. At the same time, the federal emergency COVID dollars poured in, so the city moved families to their own hotel rooms.

Having their own place to stay — even if it is a hotel room — has given some stability to many families during the pandemic, said Dave Mayo-Kiely, who coordinates the Anchorage School District's homeless family program.



Rhonda Tate's daughters Mercii (left) and Lydia wait for the bus at the lobby for a school bus. (Photo by Lex Treinen/Alaska Public Media)

But there have been bumps in the system, he said. Communication between the city, families and organizations that support them has sometimes been spotty. Some hotels have decided not to renew contracts with the city if they have one bad tenant, forcing dozens of families to move with just a few days' notice. It's hard on families, especially kids, said Mayo-Kiely.

"No one really likes to move," he said. "If you're at one motel for a couple of weeks, then you've got to transition to another one. I mean — that's certainly disruptive."

Tate and Brady said while they're thankful for all the help they've gotten so far, they're eager to get out of the hotel. They qualify for federal housing vouchers, but they've been waiting about six months for an apartment to free up that's big enough for their family.

Brady said when they call to check where they are on the waiting list, they're told that there's not enough available housing — demand far exceeds supply. He doesn't know if the family is any closer to getting housing than they were six months ago.

"It's just like, what else could we do here?" he said. "I mean, what else are we to do?"

Natasha Gamache, an advocate for homeless families in Anchorage, said Brady's and Tate's experience is common. Gamache, who is also homeless with her kids and looking for permanent housing, said even finding someone to call in an emergency can be daunting.

"People will say, 'Oh, well just call 211, and they'll tell you what to do,'" she said, referencing the number for the community resource hotline. "And it's not that simple. It almost never works out properly."

When she was looking for a place to stay this winter, she said, she got bounced from the 211 hotline to the Abused Women's Aid in Crisis shelter to the Anchorage Police Department and then to the Red Cross. She said she was ultimately told that her best bet would be to find a safe parking lot and sleep in her car.

"There's a lot of miscommunication and misunderstandings and a lot of kind of passing the buck, and it is incredibly frustrating," she said.

Terria Ware, with the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness, said big families are having to wait a long time for a home — sometimes up to a year. The problem isn't funding, she said, it's available housing.

"We need more units," she said. "And if you're talking about families, some of our families are quite large. So where are those three-bedrooms?"

Ware said city officials, nonprofits and a team from federal Department of Housing and Urban Development are racing to find more permanent housing in Anchorage as the city hands off its control of the pandemic shelter response to social service organizations and tries to move out of its largest shelter at the Sullivan Arena.

It's an uphill battle to find more units. Some landlords or hotel owners have had a bad experience renting to agencies that serve homeless people and have stopped contracting with them, said Denice Delgado, social services director for the Salvation Army in Anchorage.

“Some of them were completely frustrated after the pandemic of not getting payment or having to go through the eviction process, and some have got out of the rental game altogether, or refuse to take vouchers,” she said.

Despite the challenges, there are some families moving into more permanent housing. Nearly 300 families with children have been housed since September, according to the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness. Delgado said the Salvation Army helped find permanent stable housing for 450 families last year.

Back at the Alex Hotel on a recent morning, Tate’s family was getting restless. She and four of her kids were waiting in the lobby for the school bus. Tate looked sleepy. The kids squirmed around on the couches.

“They need their own space,” she said. “I need them to have a room. Just being cooped up in this one room, it’s just too much.”

She said her kids are also behind on their schoolwork. Last year in Las Vegas, Tate said, she struggled with an abusive ex-partner and wasn’t able to get her kids to classes.

Here in Anchorage, she said, they like their new school and she’s glad they moved to Alaska even though housing has been really hard.

Her daughter, Lydia, who’s in first grade, is looking forward to her own space.

“I want my own room so I can play with my Barbie dolls. I know my mom and dad doesn’t have that much money, so I’m gonna let them buy stuff for my other sister and my other brother,” she said.

Tate, reclined on a couch nearby, forced a smile. She said after her kids make it to school, she’d try to get in a quick nap before a job interview at FedEx.