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Many fear looming housing, homelessness ‘crisis’ amid hold on evictions

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By J.D. Capelouto, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“This is a catastrophe waiting to happen here.”

Michelle Camper was already fighting to stay afloat before the coronavirus pandemic began, as she searched for permanent housing while living in an extended stay motel.

When temp agency jobs dried up in March, she lost her income.

“Me and my daughter could have been outdoors,” said Camper, 34, who lives in Gwinnett County. She now works the overnight shift at a nearby gas station, but isn’t confident about the long-term stability of that job either. She worries about what could happen next to her and her 10-year-old daughter if she’s not able to pay a week of motel rent. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to handle this situation.”



By Kroger

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Camper and others living in poverty were already on the financial brink, and the pandemic threatens to push them over the edge. Leaders who work in the nonprofit and charity sector related to homelessness and housing worry more metro Atlantans will fall into homelessness now, straining the limited resources available to help, they told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

A local nonprofit that assists homeless people said the pandemic has already brought an increased demand for emergency housing and other resources for displaced Atlantans.



“We see a housing crisis coming. ... It’s a real worry,” said Denise Fisher, a case worker for [St. Vincent de Paul Georgia](#), which provides direct help to people in poverty. “This is a catastrophe waiting to happen here.”

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Compounding the concerns are [thousands of evictions](#) that are only temporarily paused during the pandemic. Evictions for nonpayment of rent have been filed across the state since mid-March. But a statewide judicial emergency, which has been in effect since mid-March, halted most court functions, including eviction proceedings.

Last week, that judicial emergency was [extended until mid-July](#); formal eviction proceedings could ramp back up again when the order expires.

‘I don’t want to go back’

Monica Griffin, 51, knows what it feels like to be evicted. She was forced to move in with a friend last year after not being able to afford rent and utilities at her last place in Gwinnett. With the help of [CaringWorks](#), a local nonprofit, she was able to eventually find stable and affordable housing, moving into a Stonecrest-area apartment with her teenage daughter in December.

But when the pandemic temporarily shut down the daycare she worked at, she lost her income and was unable to pay her rent. While she waited for her unemployment benefits to arrive, she worried about being displaced again.



Photo: Curtis Compton / ccompton@ajc.com

“I just got on my feet, I don’t want to go back,” Griffin remembers thinking. “I don’t want to go back to where I was.”

Griffin is thankful she has an understanding landlord who did not file for eviction and allowed her to pay back rent when she finally received her unemployment benefits in June.

Many aren’t as fortunate.

“We’re worried there’s going to be a significant backlog” of evictions, said Steve Gottlieb, the executive director of [Atlanta Legal Aid](#), adding that “we are in a kind of wait-and-see mode.”

The uncertainty has housing advocates and homeless service providers on edge.

Fisher estimated that statewide, St. Vincent de Paul Georgia has helped 4,200 families looking for aid and housing assistance this year, which is about 26% more than normal. Gottlieb said Legal Aid has seen a 500% increase in the number of calls it has received related to unemployment as the number of jobless claims in Georgia jumped to 2.5 million. Carol Collard, the president and CEO of CaringWorks, said 45% of the employed people they assist have been furloughed or had their hours reduced.

The number of people experiencing homelessness has generally decreased in Atlanta over the past several years, from about 4,300 in 2015 to 3,200 last year, according to [Partners for HOME](#), a nonprofit that leads the city of Atlanta's strategic plan on homelessness. Poverty and economic inequality have remained pressing issues in the city, with about one-fifth of Atlanta residents living below the poverty line before the pandemic hit, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



Photo: Curtis Compton / ccompton@ajc.com

The coronavirus' impact on the economy through business closures and job losses has disproportionately affected poor residents, a Federal Reserve survey released last month found. Many worry unemployment benefits and the recent stimulus payments have not reached everyone who needs them, and that they might not be enough for some to make ends meet, especially people already living paycheck to paycheck.

“When unemployment hits 15-plus percent, you’re definitely going to see those on the margins falling into homelessness,” said Tony Johns, the executive director of [Crossroads Community Ministries](#), an Atlanta nonprofit that assists people facing homelessness. The state unemployment rate hit 12.6% in April.

‘The dam is breaking’

Local organizations that provide housing assistance have ramped up their diversion and prevention efforts. Some of that work had begun before the pandemic hit, said Cathryn Marchman, the executive director of Partners for HOME. For example, the organization invested \$650,000 into diversion programs, aimed at immediately helping families experiencing homelessness get them back on their feet as quickly as possible.

CaringWorks, St. Vincent de Paul and similar groups have stepped up their usual rent relief programs. The city of Clarkston allocated up to \$100,000 to directly pay rent for tenants in the city who are at risk of being evicted.



Photo: ALYSSA POINTER / ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM

The recent CARES Act could also delay a flood of evictions; the law bars properties that have federally backed loans or housing subsidies from pursuing eviction over nonpayment of rent until July 25.

The [Atlanta Dream Center](#), which helps people who have fallen into homelessness and connects them with organizations that could assist them, said it has already seen an increase in need since the pandemic hit. After mid-March, the nonprofit said it saw an 83% rise in the number of calls to its support line from those who are already homeless, and has assisted more than 60 people facing homelessness — many for the first time.

“We’ve already begun to see the first wave of homelessness. ... I don’t know how big the nets are that are going to catch people,” said Dan Palmer, the CEO of the Atlanta Dream Center. “The dam is breaking, so now it’s going to get worse.”

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People who are living with friends, in hotels or somewhere else without a formal lease can be displaced without being formally evicted, Palmer pointed out. [Legal Aid](#) has argued that people living longterm in extended stay hotels should have tenants’ rights and be subject to formal eviction procedures if they cannot pay weekly rent.

Still, Camper, the single mother living in the Gwinnett extended stay motel, remains stressed.

“Everything is new,” she said, referring to her situation during the pandemic. “I don’t want to sink with everything going on.”

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