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Columbus poor struggle with evictions, high housing costs

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If she can find a place, Danielle Bailey said, she'll probably have to spend more than half her monthly income on rent. That's a best-case scenario. She and her children have been stuck since March in a worse one.

"Homelessness is not just not having a house," Bailey said.

The 32-year-old is trying to land a new job, find a house or apartment, get her cellphone fixed, care for four children and keep depression at bay — all while living in an emergency shelter. "I need to get a foot in the door," Bailey said. "And I need my own door."

Housing loss has long been considered a condition of poverty in America. Matthew Desmond says it's time to flip that view and see eviction as a cause.

"If we want more family stability and more community stability, we need fewer evictions," said Desmond, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author who spoke Wednesday during the Community Shelter Board's annual gathering at the Southern Theatre, Downtown. "Without housing, everything falls apart."

Desmond spent months living in a trailer park and an impoverished inner-city Milwaukee neighborhood, conducting research and following the struggles of eight families and two landlords to write "Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City."

Once rare, eviction is now commonplace throughout urban areas of the country, including Columbus, which has the state's busiest eviction court.

According to Franklin County Municipal Court, nearly 18,000 evictions were filed, and more than 10,000 judgments issued last year. And those judgments don't reflect all the agreements to vacate and off-the-books displacements that happen every day.

Minority women are most affected. "Eviction is like the feminine equivalent to incarceration," Desmond said. "Men are locked up; women are locked out."

Stagnant earnings and a lack of affordable housing trap families in a cycle, pushing them into ever-more precarious situations and substandard housing as they search for landlords willing to look past an eviction history.

Relatively few poor families receive housing assistance, Desmond said. Waiting lists for Section 8 vouchers stretch to years or even decades.

"When we think of the typical poor family today, we shouldn't think of someone with a voucher or someone in public housing," he said. "Seventy-five percent of renting families below the poverty line receive no housing assistance."

A report released Thursday by the National Low Income Housing Coalition and the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio documents the widening gap between wages and housing costs in all of the state's 88 counties. While the difference is greatest in Appalachian Ohio, metro Columbus has the highest "housing wage."

To spend no more than 30 percent of gross income on rent, a Columbus worker needs to earn at least \$17.04 an hour to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment, the report said. The fair-market rent for that apartment is now \$886, so at minimum wage, a worker would need 2.1 full-time jobs to afford it. A worker at the mean hourly wage for a Columbus renter — estimated at \$16.07 — still would fall short.

Nearly all who stay in Columbus shelters have experienced eviction, said Michelle Heritage, executive director of the Community Shelter Board.

"I believe we've really got to look at two big issues: living wages and affordable housing," she said. "We need, as a community, to develop long-term solutions. The worst possible thing we could be faced with is having to build more homeless shelters."

In the short-term, enhanced prevention efforts — more legal aid, tenant-landlord mediation, a focus on retaliatory evictions — could help, Heritage and others say.

Desmond advocates for universal housing vouchers. He said the country can well afford the expense, especially if it does away with the costly mortgage-interest deduction, which primarily benefits white homeowners.

Eviction and homelessness lead to grave suffering, Desmond said. “By no American value is this justified.”

Bailey, a lifelong Columbus resident staying in the Van Buren shelter, has at times lost housing to eviction, job and family changes. “A couple houses fell through, others haven’t called me back,” she said of her latest search.

Bailey keeps trying. The last thing she can afford to give up, she said, is hope.
