

S. Tahoe families struggle to find stable housing

By Nicole Zaborsky

Homelessness has many faces. Some are old, some are young. It affects all races, religions and sexes. It can be triggered by a poor economy, inconsistent work, a medical catastrophe, and death of a family member. In Lake Tahoe Unified School District there are 246 homeless students.

I recently sat down with one of those students to understand a day in the life of a homeless student.

For five months, Keira (not her real name) has been living in a one-room motel with four other family members and pets. The cost of a motel is \$35 a night or \$1,065 a month.

"We move weekly. Our homelessness is a result of inconsistent employment. In December of last year, we were living in a three-bedroom house. We had a kitchen, we each had a bed, and we had a proper place to do our homework," she said.



Homelessness is a serious issue in South Lake Tahoe.

Photo/Albert Bridge

While they are appreciative they have a roof over their heads, there is a desire to better their living situation. At most

motels, there is only a hot plate and no refrigerator, which can lead to families eating less healthy and more expensive meals. Many families eat prepared foods because of the lack of kitchen appliances, meal preparation space. And for Keira's family, because they are moving each week.

"It's overwhelming. Our family's situation is like being in a hole and there is no movement. It's hard to get up in the morning, and it's hard to get to school, but I don't give up. When I come to school, I leave my baggage at the door and focus on the progress in myself," she said.

To cope with her five months of homelessness, Keira says, "I distract myself. I hang out with friends and we go on hikes. I try not to dwell on my situation. My pets help me cope."

She can easily feel stuck, and overwhelmed that the family situation is not progressing.

"I focus on myself and my education to ensure I graduate from high school in June. I will be the first in my family to graduate," Keira said.

LTUSD counselors and staff work with the homeless youth and their families. They assist families to connect to community resources such as food, apartment searches and job leads. Wait lists for Section 8 housing, credit and reference checks, and saving the money for the deposit are barriers to homeless families obtaining long-term housing.

Keira shares, "We have faced renter abuse. Our family has been given verbal promises that a house will be rented to us in exchange for cleaning it. Then the landlord never returns our calls."

Keira has a job. Her income assists the family pay for food, rent and basic needs. Her story is one that many of our community members face.

There is a Warm Room Committee that has been meeting to develop multi-pronged options for families facing homelessness or unstable housing. The next Warm Room Facilities Advisory Group meeting is June 5, 10:30am at Live Violence Free. Volunteers are welcome to assist with tasks and actions.

Additionally, the St. Joseph Community Land Trust has begun to accept donations to assist LTUSD families transition from motel to long-term rental housing. Call 530.541.8930 for more information. Checks may be mailed to St. Joseph Community Land Trust, 1041 Lyons Ave., South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150. Mark the check "Motel to Housing Fund".

Nicole Zaborsky is coordinator for the Lake Tahoe Collaborative and member of the Warm Room Committee.