

POVERTY AND HOUSING INSECURITY ALONG JEFFERSON DAVIS HIGHWAY

STORIES BY VANESSA REMMERS AND MICHAEL O'CONNOR

“You’re one medical problem, one loss of a job, from ruining your credit. A middle income family with one judgment against them is one step away from that person in a hotel. And that should scare everyone.”



Twins Sophia and Samuel Hamlin, 2, stand outside of their family’s home in the Bermuda Estates mobile home park along Jefferson Davis Highway. Their father, Richard Hamlin, worries that the park could close to make way for a housing development his family can’t afford to live in. “That’s why so many people have to stay in hotels,” he said. “They keep closing the trailer parks.”



Kelsey Ratliff stands with her daughter Liliana, 2, in the doorway of their room at Americas Best Value Inn while Chesterfield County police officers explain that she must vacate the property. Ratliff had lived at the motel since Christmas 2016, but because she has switched rooms, the Landlord-Tenant Act does not apply to her and she is not eligible for the official eviction process.

Without other affordable housing options, hundreds of people live in motels along Jefferson Davis Highway. Here's what life is like for them.

CHESTERFIELD COUNTY

When Angie Smith's daughter was born, she made sure to keep her infant in her arms or a swing. If Arabella stopped moving, the roaches would start crawling all over her.

"It was the worst roach problem I've ever seen," Smith said.

Smith paid \$270 per week to live in Americas Best Value Inn near Jefferson Davis Highway in Chesterfield County for eight months with Arabella and her two other children. The motel room allowed her to get away from her on-again, off-again relationship with her baby's father, and also provided relief from a home mortgage and other bills.

In an increasingly impoverished Chesterfield, an affordable housing scarcity, coupled with credit and background requirements for apartments, has led hundreds of people like Smith to settle for months — or years — at motels, many along the Jeff Davis corridor. This past school year, 160 Chesterfield students lived in hotels or motels. Across the state, nearly 3,000 students found shelter the same way.

It is up to county and state inspectors to enforce regulations designed to protect people from unhealthy conditions at the motels. The fear of eviction leaves many motel residents feeling powerless to complain about the conditions, so the inspectors' ability to investigate complaints and proactively inspect properties is critical.

On the local level, however, hundreds of Chesterfield inspection reports indicated that inspectors examined two mobile home parks more than three nearby motels. And year after year, state health inspection reports of three Chesterfield motels described similar problems.

"My suspicion is that many localities turn a blind eye to the really horrible living conditions in a lot of these extended-stay motels," said Phil Storey, an attorney with Richmond's Legal Aid Justice Center, which provides services to low-income individuals.

Chesterfield officials and poverty and housing advocates say affordable housing is a nationwide problem and serious issues exist at some motels, but they differ in how they talk about addressing the problem.

County planners say that the county is playing its part in tackling affordable housing in the region and that Chesterfield has a large stock of affordable housing units. Poverty and housing advocates call on localities like Chesterfield to take a more active role.

In the meantime, many families are at the mercy of the motel owners, living in the kinds of conditions that Smith said she wouldn't wish on anyone.

In May, Trimaine "Minnie" Reed opened her dresser drawer to find cockroaches crawling over her socks and underwear. She has lived with the roaches for three years at Americas Best, now in Room 120 after moving from another room where she said the bathroom ceiling had caved in.

Reed is one of the few residents who have taken the battle to court. She asserted her rights under the Landlord-Tenant Act when B.R. Patel, Americas Best owner, tried to remove her for failing to pay her rent. Because Reed had stayed at the motel longer than 90 days, Patel was

legally required to issue her an eviction-related notice. On the court date for the eviction proceeding, Reed planned to tell a judge about the motel's conditions.

Patel referred questions to his lawyer, R. Glen Morgan, who said, "There's plenty of other hotels. Obviously, it's not that bad or she would leave."

The owners of two other motels that also have significant tenant populations, the Virginian Motel and Par 3 Motel, declined to comment or didn't respond to multiple requests for comment.

Most of the motel tenants aren't like Reed. Instead, they silently count down the months or years until they can move out, or drift to another motel. After her tax-return money came in, Smith moved her family into a cheaper rental cabin in Chesterfield where she pays \$200 a week.

"Some people just slip through the cracks," Smith said.

Less than a mile from Americas Best Value Inn, Twonneil Butler's son once scraped a leg when the bathroom floor at the Virginian gave out beneath him. When Butler asked to have the floor fixed, it took a week for the owner to provide a piece of plywood that could patch up the hole, Butler said.

He later found all of his belongings scattered in the Virginian's parking lot after he didn't pay his rent. His things were eventually stolen or thrown in dumpsters.

The Virginian's owner declined to comment.

"It's 'Pay me or get out,' " Butler said. "Things need to change. The upkeep needs to be taken care of."

On the state level, health inspection reports of three motels told a story of persistent problems.

The Virginia Department of Health is the only agency with the power to inspect the inside of hotel rooms at any time for their overall condition, as long as those rooms are vacant and ready to rent. VDH does not inspect mobile home parks because those are private residences, but it does go above state requirements by inspecting about 10 percent of rooms in all Chesterfield hotels.

Four of five state health inspection reports from 2014 to 2016 at Americas Best Value Inn noted unspecified insects, roaches or bedbugs. Six customer complaints were filed in the same period because of roaches or bedbugs. On two separate inspections from January 2014, mice droppings were observed.

Citations of health code violations weren't unique to Americas Best Value Inn. The Par 3 Motel and Virginian Motel both received complaints about bed bugs, with social services at one point assisting an elderly man and his mother moving out of an infested room at the Virginian.

"That should send a red flag to an inspector. Even if it is a small problem, if it's the same problem year after year it should send a red flag," said Dennis O'Connor, environmental health supervisor for the Chesterfield Health District.

Following up on cited violations depends on the severity of the situation, O'Connor said, and for minor problems, "we're going to hope they correct it."

In Chesterfield, the Bermuda Estates and Shady Hill mobile home parks are less than 20 miles from the Par 3 Motel, Virginian Motel and Americas Best Value Inn along the Jeff Davis corridor. With the exception of the Par 3, the properties lie in an area the county identified as needing proactive inspections.

But in the past decade, Chesterfield inspectors opened cases in the two mobile home parks six times more often than at the three motels, according to a review of more than 350 Chesterfield building and zoning inspection records. This was even though the fewer inspections at the motels revealed more serious issues.

"That is concerning to me, no doubt about it. I would have to do some research on that. (The disparity) should be an oversight, if at all. We are concerned about every facility in the county," said Supervisor James Holland, whose district includes part of the corridor.

Deputy County Administrator William Dupler said there is a "whole lot more opportunity for violations to occur" at the mobile home parks. Local inspectors can examine inside motel rooms only on the rare occasion that they obtain a warrant or they are invited into a room by the resident or the motel owner. But, like at the nearby mobile home parks, local inspectors are able to issue violations for external red flags like damaged siding, mold, trash, crumbling structures, or cracked paint and windows.

"Care and maintenance of a property is not the county's responsibility. It's the owner's responsibility," Dupler said. "By and large these mobile home park owners don't maintain their properties to the same standard as the motel owners do."

Inoperable vehicles or discarded materials like old furniture or baby seats sitting outside were among the most common violations at the mobile home parks. At the motels, however, the fewer inspections revealed vermin, collapsed stairs and, in one case, a septic tank at Par 3 leaking into nearby woods.

An anonymous complaint prompted the inspection that revealed the leaking septic tank. Over the past decade, it often took complaints for an issue at the motels to come to the attention of county building or zoning inspectors.

A woman temporarily staying at Americas Best Value called the county in February 2016 with complaints about holes in the walls, inoperable door locks and bugs crawling on the beds. An inspector closed the case a month later, saying the “owner said all problems have been corrected.”



The story was different at the two mobile home parks, where greater numbers of proactive inspections contributed to the much higher tide of violations.

Chesterfield Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Dorothy Jaeckle, who represents part of the Jeff Davis corridor, said the centralization provided by the county's new Community Enhancement Department will help with the motels' issues.

“One of the goals of the Department of Community Enhancement is to centralize many of the aspects of revitalization and redevelopment. I believe with the police, fire and EMS, social services, building and zoning working as a group, many of the issues you mentioned will be at the forefront and more pressure will be put on landlords to make the necessary improvements,” Jaeckle wrote in an email.

It's unclear how many more cases may have been opened if the fear of eviction didn't hang over many of the motel residents or if there had been more proactive inspections.

When someone stays at the motel for longer than 90 days, they have rights under the Landlord-Tenant Act, including that landlords can't retaliate against tenants for lodging complaints. But the law often doesn't offer its intended protection, said Marcellinus L.M.B Slag, an attorney with the Legal Aid Justice Center. Landlords often simply claim in court that the eviction wasn't connected to the tenant's prior complaint.

“It's an exploited population,” Slag said.

Outside a Chesterfield courtroom in early July, Reed held a folder of papers and some photos of her room that she wanted to show the judge. Reed said she felt like a hostage because she feared leaving her room might mean she would be locked out.

Last Tuesday, in a room not far from Reed's at Americas Best, Liliana Ratliff played with a moldy vent broken off from the air-conditioning unit in early August. Water sprinkled from the rumbling machine and soaked the carpet. The 2-year-old then sauntered over to the bathroom, where roach traps sat near her bare feet and patches of mold stained the walls. In the main room, her mother, Kelsey, packed stuffed animals and clothes while Liliana's 5-week-old sister sat in a swing.

Three Chesterfield police officers who knocked on the family's door that morning told Kelsey Ratliff that she and her children had to leave for failing to pay rent. The family had stayed at Americas Best for longer than 90 days, but because they had switched rooms about two months ago because of the conditions in their previous room, Ratliff said she wasn't protected under the Landlord-Tenant Act. Ratliff wasn't sure where they would stay that night. All of the nearby extended-stay motels were booked, and she needed something that was \$200 a week or less.

Nearly two dozen people living in motels along Jefferson Davis like Ratliff gave a common reason for why they weren't living somewhere else: The motels are the best they can afford.

A Chesterfield committee recently called housing affordability an "economic trend of concern," noting that someone earning the \$7.25 hourly minimum wage would have to work at least 89 hours a week to afford a one-bedroom apartment rental in the county, where the median rent is \$1,123. That trend, the committee continued, could affect the entire county in terms of stunted business growth, increased public safety calls and less tax revenue, among other things.

At the same time, the total number of people living in poverty in Chesterfield increased by 107 percent between 2000 and 2015, to 24,002. A family of four earning below \$24,257 was considered living below the federal poverty line in 2015.

"We don't have a regulation today that requires affordable dwelling units as a percentage of a development."

Kirk Turner, head of Chesterfield's Community Enhancement Department

The problem isn't confined to Chesterfield's borders. According to the 2017 Out of Reach report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Virginia is ranked 11th on a list of the most unaffordable states in the U.S. for renters.

Dupler, the deputy county administrator, said that if Chesterfield had the solution, so would the rest of the nation.

"We don't like the fact that these motels have transitioned to housing for people. We don't think that is right. But we didn't transition them to housing for people. I think you ought to go ask the

(motel) owners about it. What are they doing to provide affordable housing for people?" Dupler said, adding that Chesterfield has a large stock of affordable housing. "What is within our authority to address it? There are not a lot of tools out there to address it."

Housing advocates called for mandatory minimums for affordable housing units in new developments to address the "huge scarcity" of affordable housing along the corridor and throughout the county. They also called for greater transparency in the apartment application process and a broad rental subsidy program that could start off as a pilot partially funded by the county.

The Chesterfield Towne Center area and a wide span of the county should be priority areas for affordable housing development, according to a recently released report by the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University. There are 67,000 more modest-wage jobs than low-cost housing units in a suburban doughnut around the city of Richmond.

"We don't have a regulation today that requires affordable dwelling units as a percentage of a development. Some metropolitan areas do have those," said Kirk Turner, Chesterfield's former planning director and new head of the Community Enhancement Department. "We just haven't gotten there yet. That's not to say that might not be in our future, but it isn't today."

A coalition created by officials in Portland, Ore., helped preserve 11 buildings that provide affordable housing. Rockville, Md., adopted a plan to replace a failing strip mall with a town center that required 15 percent of 644 units to be affordable.

Those two examples were cited in a study commissioned by the Partnership for Housing Affordability, on which Dupler serves as a board member.

"We're participating in some regional efforts to affect the housing affordability issue. It's a tough nut to crack," Dupler said. He added that the county recently expanded a tax credit program for homeowners who rehabilitate their homes.

Discussions over revisions to two of Chesterfield's high-level plans are ongoing, including revisions to one plan aimed at revitalizing the northern section of the corridor that calls for more affordable housing options.

"Just laying out a plan without zoning or financial incentives is going to be a challenge," said Greta Harris, the president of the nonprofit Better Housing Coalition whose aim is to increase quality affordable housing in the region. "Quality affordable housing is not inexpensive. So that is where the political will comes in. We need policy, mandates, to get private and nonprofit working in concert with one another."

Supervisor Holland said he believes the county could encourage developers more to be socially conscious to improve affordable housing along the corridor, and was pleased with the county's willingness to waive fees for developers who want to build along Jeff Davis.

Carrie Coyner, who is Jaeckle's counterpart on the School Board and who represents the Jeff Davis corridor, said the county's plans should call for more affordable housing options in such a way that the county's average salary is reflected in each elementary school zone.

Housing advocates also suggested a broad rental subsidy program funded in part by the county.

THE JEFFERSON DAVIS CORRIDOR

Across the nation, 3 of every 4 eligible low-income renter households do not receive federal rental assistance due to funding shortages. The number of unassisted renter households with "worst-case" housing needs rose by more than 30 percent between 2007 and 2013, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

That means long waiting lists are common. It's unclear how long a waiting list is for a federal program that enables low-income families to choose and lease affordable housing in the Chesterfield and Colonial Heights areas because that waiting list is now closed. The program served 501 households in 2016.

County officials responded by saying a program like that would probably be administered by the state or federal government.

For those who do have enough money to pay rent, there are then hurdles in the apartment application process like credit and background checks.

"You're one medical problem, one loss of a job, from ruining your credit. A middle-income family with one judgment against them is one step away from that person in a hotel. And that should scare everyone," Coyner said. "If we want to truly change the lives of people who are living in overpriced housing, we would be out there meeting one person at a time to rebuild their credit."

Jaeckle, the Board of Supervisors chairwoman, wrote in an email that the county's social services department is working to help people become financially independent.

Christine Marra, an attorney with the Virginia Poverty Law Center, said housing providers should be required to publicize their tenant selection criteria.

"Many landlords are using third-party screening companies, and it is not uncommon for these companies to get it wrong. They are doing searches that are using a portion of people's names," she said, adding that those searches often look for past arrests that didn't necessarily lead to a conviction.

Advocates said that for the immediate future, localities should value mobile home parks. Their median monthly cost, according to one study looking at 20 area jurisdictions, is \$400 less than the \$993 median monthly home cost in the region.

“We sort of overlooked our mobile homes as affordable housing, but some of our mobile homes are valuable assets. And we want to make sure we are protecting them,” Coyner said.

Nineteen mobile home parks consisting of 1,657 units still exist in Chesterfield, though the county’s 2017 housing report noted that it is the only housing type in the county to shrink since 2001, reducing by a total of 25 percent because they either shut down or were redeveloped.

“It’s not a place to raise children,” Pam Steele said of the motels. “But where are they going to go if (Americas Best Value Inn’s owner) says screw it? Does somebody have a plan for that? We’ve got to come up with a solution.”

Steele’s sign-in sheet on a Friday in early June is nearly filled. She is the intake coordinator at the Place of Miracles Café, which sits adjacent to Americas Best and serves free meals donated by nearby businesses.

Next to more than half of the names on the sign-in sheet are abbreviations for the motels in which the clients are staying. The rest live in tents or mobile home parks.

The cafe is part of a patchwork of nonprofits and unofficial community organizations that attempt to fill gaps in services for the long-term motel residents. These groups of mainly volunteers feed families, help with rent or pressure motel owners about room conditions. They also acknowledged their efforts are Band-Aids on a larger problem.

Chris Lane said if he and his community organization called the Guardians had more support from the county, more progress could be made on addressing poverty. For Steele, the motel owners are a necessary evil since she has only seen plans and committees come from the county.

“Do you want them in a moldy motel room or do you want them in a tent in the woods?” she said. “It’s awful, but where are you going to put them?”

Trimaine Reed woke up for her second court date on July 20 unsure of where she would be sleeping that night.

She would never get to show the judge the photos of her room. It took about 10 minutes for the judge to decide that Reed had to move out of her home of three years. She forgot to file paperwork laying out her defense to the claim that she owed \$4,015.81 to Americas Best Value Inn, so the judge ruled in the motel’s favor.

Reed didn't understand what happened as she stood before the judge. Outside the courtroom, when she was told the eviction was official, she started to cry.

The motel's attorney offered to forgo the money it argued was owed if Reed would agree to cover the attorney's fees and move out within a day or so. Reed eventually agreed, but that meant she needed to figure out where to go at that moment.

An attempt to join a rehab center didn't work out. Moving to another motel, as Americas Best Value Inn's lawyer suggested she could, wasn't an option.

"The majority of hotels on Willis Road is the same as Americas Best Value," Reed said. "It's not that easy."

Within days, she packed up her Bible and the "Twilight" board game her sister gave her several years ago for her birthday.

The rest she left.

MARVIN CHERRY



"You get ahead 10 steps, you fall back 100"

Marvin Cherry leaned back in his chair inside his motel room off Jefferson Davis Highway, chewing his half-wrapped beef jerky.

It's Wednesday, his only day off for the week from his cooking job at Friendly's, where he earns \$12 an hour. "Gunsmoke" is playing on the television.

Tomorrow at about 6 a.m., the 59-year-old will climb into a cab and pay \$20 round-trip to work his eight-hour shift.

He used to have a Honda Accord, but Hurricane Matthew washed it away when he traveled to Portsmouth to attend his brother's funeral last fall. Someone then found the license plate to run through tolls, and Cherry said he received more than \$1,000 in fines.

"You get ahead 10 steps, you fall back 100," Cherry said.

But it isn't tomorrow yet, and Cherry still has hours before he has to think about work again. He beats the 90-degree afternoon heat by shifting his chair near the new air-conditioning unit between the powder-blue curtains, and he watches the same old Westerns that his mother used to switch on after her shifts at a laundromat. Next up is "Bonanza."

The AC unit is a blessing and a curse because here, at the Par 3 Motel, the owners insisted on increasing the room's weekly rent from \$190 to \$200 for the benefit, though other tenants at the motel have said they are paying less even with AC. Cherry shakes his head at the situation, then extends his long legs out from the tiny motel table chair.

From the other side of the room, Staci Austin shuffles from the bathroom in a T-shirt and shorts. She is sick, coughing and unable to keep anything down. She climbs into bed and tucks under the sheets because she feels her fever is coming back.

"Happy Birthday" rainbow balloons sway over the dresser full of orange pill bottles Austin uses to treat her schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, diabetes and panic attacks. She turned 45 last week.

She said her cough has gotten worse during the four years that she and Cherry have been living at the Par 3 Motel. She believes it's exacerbated by the black mold under their clothes rack across from the bed and in the corners of the yellow motel room walls. The carpet on the right side of the bed has dark spots with a smell Austin likens to a dirty mop.

When it rains, water runs from cracks and small holes in the walls near the bed and above their hanging clothes. Austin said the motel owner insisted there wasn't a roof leak and nailed a wooden square over a hole a plumber drilled into the wall near the bed.

Small brown footprints are scattered over the door leading into the kitchen because the previous tenant had pet squirrels, Austin said. After a rat got through a space between a back door and its frame, Austin put up plastic bags to seal the room from the outside.

The motel owners are a nice couple, Austin said, but "they ignore it when something is going to cost them money."

"They do good things, but they do need to fix things. It's their business," she said.

The motel owners didn't respond to multiple requests for comment.

Later, Cherry decides he will fry chicken winglets on the hot plate for dinner. His mother taught him how to cook when he was a teenager so he could be self-sufficient, he said.

He will fry the winglets on the hot plate because the stove in the room has never worked.

“This isn’t no mansion, but it’s home. It’s our mansion. It’s the best we can do.”

When he got out of the Army after 13 years, he moved to Chesterfield County to get away from “trouble” in Portsmouth and started working at Friendly’s. He has worked at Friendly’s for 25 years, first at the Colonial Heights location as a manager until it closed down and he lost his benefits. Now, he is a cook at the Chester location.

Their next-door neighbor knocks. She lives alone in a much smaller room, and she is one of the few Austin and Cherry let into their room because of a fear of bedbugs. The owners do have an exterminator come to the motel once a month, they said.

All three remember the smell when a leaking septic tank left a pile of sewage not far from their rooms last year. That was the only time they remember inspectors on the property. Until just a few weeks ago in that same grassy area behind the motel rooms, mattresses dotted with mold were piled up against a shed, along with some old televisions.

The neighbor checks to see if Austin needs anything, if she is feeling better, then she leaves for work.

Austin sifts through the collection of orange pill bottles on the dresser. Monthly disability payments of \$784 help her pay for the medication and also for the rent and groceries. She and Cherry split everything down the middle.

She said her symptoms related to anxiety, depression, panic attacks and schizophrenia set in after she watched her biological father die from cancer when she was in her early 30s. “I just broke,” she said.

She was a daddy’s girl, she said. Her mother left her and her sister on a curb when she was 3. In the months that they were in the foster care system, she said, she saw a woman try to drown her sister in the tub. Her sister was wearing packaging for a loaf of bread as her diaper when their adoptive parents came to pick them up. Austin stayed close with her father even after being adopted, but eventually both her adoptive parents and her biological father died.

“That’s the question that always runs through me. How come every time I love someone, they leave?” she said.

She was in between homes when she met Cherry, who offered to let her sleep in his motel room in Colonial Heights 13 years ago. The two have been together since.

“That’s just in me. My mom taught me that you help anyone you can. Anything is better with a roof over your head,” Cherry said.

Austin gets a text from her 16-year-old son, who lives in Alabama with his father. Her son is thinking about using about \$50 for a car wash, but she encourages him to save that money for college. He is an honor-roll student, she said.

Her son has never visited her here. He owns a BMW and has “nice things,” she explains. “It would break my heart if my son had to use the bathroom here,” she said.

A rusted monkey wrench hangs from one of the shower knobs. The cracked yellow bathroom tiles are sunken and splotchy with dark stains.

Eventually, Cherry and Austin hope to move out. They don’t know exactly when that may be.

“Me and Marvin don’t have money for a deposit, first month’s rent,” Austin said. “It was the only place we could afford with our income.”

“You’ve got to have \$2,500 just to walk into the door,” Cherry said.

So for now, this is home.

“This isn’t no mansion, but it’s home. It’s our mansion. It’s the best we can do,” Austin said.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Richmond Times-Dispatch reporters Vanessa Remmers and Michael O’Connor tell these residents’ stories and examine the policies and practices that contribute to their housing problems.