



CU-CitizenAccess.org is a journalism Web site and social network devoted to coverage and discussion of social and economic issues within Champaign County.

Launched in December 2009, this Web site offers a place for citizens, journalists and university students to share news, raise and discuss issues, find assistance and suggest solutions.

The site is backed with funding from the Marajen Stevick Foundation and the University of Illinois, with a matching grant from the John S. Knight and James L. Knight Foundation.

The News-Gazette is a project collaborator, along with contributions from the faculty and students from the Journalism Department in the College of Media at the University of Illinois.

Like all Web sites, this is - and will be - a work in progress. It is intended to bring together all parts of the community to disclose and deal with the issues previously overlooked and those that have grown from the new economy.

The project also is intended to create as many avenues as possible for citizens to address these issues, whether through this Web site, in-person or through email, social networks like Twitter, cell phones, photos and news stories.

Since its inception, CU-Citizen Access has worked with journalism and university students on several public service projects, including one that resulted in changes to county ordinances.

CU-Citizen Access has also started local news and information workshops to give neighborhood residents better avenues for reporting on issues in that matter to them. These workshops offer both training in community journalism and access to public computer labs.

On its Web site, CU-Citizen Access offers several reporting tools for citizens to use, such as interactive maps of hyperlocal problems, space for self-publication, and mobile feeds.

In May, CU-Citizen Access and the News-Gazette garnered first place for the Most Innovative Project in the 2009 Illinois Press Association News-Editorial Excellence Awards .





Woman finds education and family time through local program

CU Citizen Access - Thu, 2010-04-29 12:03

By Will Atwater—Moms and toddlers sat shoulder-to-shoulder in a semicircle inside the Columbia Street Center's preschool and sang "The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round" and other children's songs. Shayla Brown, 31, was present with her son, Xavier, 1, and daughter, Erica, 11 months. Brown and her children...

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Neighborhood Declines — And County Zoning Blocks Any Hope of Recovery

"They say we're a slum - run down. That's the way we've always been treated."

One of Champaign's oldest neighborhoods has historically been overlooked by the county in hopes that residents will eventually leave their homes in order to make more room for land zoned as light and medium industry.

CU-Citizen Access reporter Liz Clancy Lerner speaks with residents and writes about their decades-old struggle for a resolution to this government-endorsed plight.

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Farmers markets offer better access to fresh foods for low-income families

By Jhane Reifsteck—Local farmers markets in Champaign and Urbana, IL have started accepting LINK cards, creating more options for low-income people and families to obtain fresh foods.

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HOUSING



Low-income housing organization considers its future

By Paolo Cisneros—Inside her home in the quiet 1600 block of W. Healey Street in Champaign, Shawna Abner-Davis balances a full-time job as a social worker with a part-time private practice, various...

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Health care reform bridges prescription gap left by Medicare

University of Illinois student Anna Yee explores the effects of the health care reform on Medicare Part D.

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By A.M. Cole—Evelin Luna carries herself with an air of confidence uncommon for a 15-year-old. She is comfortable around adults, aware of the issues concerning the local Latino community and...

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County takes first step to help Wilber Heights residents

By Dan Petrella —The Champaign County Board took the first step Tuesday toward allowing residents of the Wilber Heights neighborhood to rebuild or make substantial improvements to their properties...

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Senior citizens find respite in area-wide food programs

By Susan Kantor—Betty, a 73-year-old Champaign resident, receives a check from Social Security the third Wednesday of every month. She worked all her life, but without one steady job, she does...

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County move to change ordinance could help neighborhood residents



By [Pam G. Dempsey](#), [Acton Gorton](#) and [Dan Petrella](#) — A Champaign County zoning official plans to propose regulatory changes for the Wilber Heights neighborhood that will combat the deterioration of residential properties.

The move follows a CU-Citizen Access investigation that exposed the impact of a zoning ordinance that has prevented residents from doing significant repairs to their homes. At the same time, the nearly 40-year-old ordinance has encouraged light and heavy industry to locate in the neighborhood.

Tags: Neighborhoods, Wilber Heights

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Budget problems threaten future of refugee center



By [Shelley Smithson](#) —A Spanish-speaking woman calls the East Central Illinois Refugee Mutual Assistance Center because she does not know where to turn for help. She says she was seriously injured when the balcony of her apartment collapsed and the apartment owner will not pay her hospital bills.

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Senior citizens find respite in area-wide food programs



By [Susan Kantor](#)—Betty, a 73-year-old Champaign resident, receives a check from Social Security the third Wednesday of every month. She worked all her life, but without one steady job, she does not receive a pension in retirement.

Tags: Eastern Illinois Food Bank, Family Service Resource Center, Food, Food for Seniors, Peace Meal, Rantoul, senior citizens

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Local police departments continue to deny open records requests



By [Dan Petrella](#)— Complaints filed by white residents with the Champaign Police Department were three times more likely to be upheld than those filed by black residents, an analysis of police records from 2006 to 2008 shows.

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By [Joel Steinfeldt](#) — This summer, Tanya Weatherly will again decide between having Internet access at home and paying her other utility bills.

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Program offers skills, computers



By [Steve Bauer](#)— Brian Bell is finding new homes for computers through a program at Parkland Community College.

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Farmers markets offer better access to fresh foods for low-income families



By [Jhane Reifsteck](#)— Local farmers markets in Champaign and Urbana, IL have started accepting LINK cards, creating more options for low-income people and families to obtain fresh foods.

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University of Illinois student Anna Yee explores the effects of the health care reform on Medicare Part D.

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Thousands live on the edge of economic despair in county

HEALTH INSURANCE, HOUSING, POVERTY, POVERTY, WAGES - By [CU Citizen Access](#) on Sunday, July 12, 2009 - 18:57

After a day of wiping tables and sweeping french fries off the floor of McDonald's, Kelly Gaddis limps home to the Courtesy Motel on North Vine Street in Urbana.

Gaddis, 53, cannot afford to buy a car or lease an apartment on the \$8 an hour he earns as a lobby attendant at McDonald's. He and his wife, who also works at the restaurant, rent a motel room by the week within walking distance of work.

He also cannot afford the company's health insurance, so he hasn't seen a doctor about a foot problem that causes him to limp. Asked what he does when he gets sick, Gaddis chuckles. "You hope you don't. Or you go to the hospital and when the bill comes, you add it to the rest of them."

Champaign County is home to a world-class university, chic new downtown lofts and more than 350 restaurants. It is also home to more than 58,600 residents — nearly one in three — who are impoverished or near poverty, according to 2007 Census Bureau data.

Every day, tens of thousands of people in Champaign County barely get by. Many work in low-wage, part-time jobs with no health insurance and no savings for emergencies such as on-the-job accidents, car repairs or workdays missed because of a sick child. They depend on government aid to buy food. Some live in pay-by-the-week motels or move farther from their jobs to lower their housing costs, but then have a harder time getting to and from work — or finding full-time work at all.

An analysis of state and federal data highlights the extent of economic hardship in Champaign County. Among the findings:

— Nearly 10,000 children — almost half of Champaign County's public school students — qualified for free or reduced lunches last school year, according to an analysis of Illinois State Board of Education data. The students' families lived at or near the federal poverty line, which is \$22,050 annually for a family of four.

— More than 10 percent of Champaign County residents lived in extreme poverty between 2005 and 2007. That means their income was less than half the federal poverty line. Statewide, 5 percent lived in extreme poverty, according to Census estimates.

— Nearly 20 percent of Champaign County residents under the age of 65 were uninsured in 2005, according to census estimates. Statewide, 15 percent of residents under the age of 65 were uninsured.

The News-Gazette and the University of Illinois Department of Journalism is beginning an interactive reporting and outreach project to document the economic disparity in Champaign County and chronicle the lives of people on the edge.

The Housing Bind

Adam Hall's family lives on the edge. The 28-year-old father of one worries constantly about having enough money to pay the bills, especially now that his wife is pregnant with twins and has been ordered by the doctor to stay in bed.

"I'm making above minimum wage, but I can't get the hours to make a proper living," said Hall, who earns \$12,000 a year working between 25 and 30 hours a week at Blockbuster Video in Champaign.

He reckons more than 75 percent of his monthly income goes for rent and housing expenses such as electricity, gas, water, sewer, phone and garbage collection.

Households earning less than \$20,000 annually in Champaign County make up 41 percent of the rental population in the county, according to 2007 Census estimates. (This excludes college students who live on campus or people who live in group homes or institutions.)

Rents in Champaign County rank high among neighboring counties, according to a 2009 analysis by the Heartland Alliance Mid-America Institute on Poverty, a Chicago-based advocacy and research organization. That's because Champaign County has a higher incidence of unrelated adults living together, including college students, said Esther Patt, volunteer director of the Champaign-Urbana Tenant Union. This drives up rents because landlords assume that unrelated adults living together will have a higher combined income, she said.

Apartment rents for June in Champaign and Urbana ranged from \$400 for a one-bedroom apartment to \$975 for a four-bedroom apartment, according to data compiled by the Tenant Union.

Hall, his wife, Crystal Bates-Hall, and their 4-year-old daughter just moved to a three-bedroom apartment in Rantoul because they could not afford an apartment the same size in Champaign, where they had been paying \$650 a month to rent a two-bedroom house.

"Rantoul is the only place we can afford a three-bedroom," says Hall, who will need the extra bedroom when the twins are born in September. "It's less in rent, but more in gas."

Many residents choose to live in towns where rents are lower, such as Rantoul. After Chanute Air Force Base closed there in 1993, investors bought up much of the housing on the base and began renting it, said Bill Zuehlke, assistant superintendent for Rantoul City Schools.



Picture by: The News-Gazette/ Kelly Gaddis and his wife, Kelly, in their home in the Courtesy Motel in Urbana.

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Not everyone can make such a move, however. People who work in Champaign-Urbana and don't have transportation have to find housing here, said Lisa Vandermark, a housing counselor for the Tenant Union. She said credit problems prevent many landlords from renting to those who need it most.

"Even the shabbiest places do a background check and they have application fees, and you still have to come up with first and last months' rent," said Martha Storm Storey, a Champaign resident who said she recently lost her \$8.45-an-hour job at Meijer after missing too many days of work because of illness. The 44-year-old lives with a friend because she cannot afford her own place.

A lost job can turn into an eviction and mounting credit problems, ingredients that force many into homelessness or to seek shelter at pay-by-the-week motels, where weekly rents can range from \$200 to \$250, depending on the number of beds. "It's a last resort," Patt said.

Pay-by-the-week motels do not require credit checks, damage deposits or utility hookups, she said.

"With the economy the way it is, we're seeing a lot more of that," said Ted Keller, a clerk at Blue Star Inn on University Avenue in Urbana. Many families with children live in rooms with one bed, he said.

More people are seeking housing assistance as unemployment rises or work hours decrease, said Darlene Kloeppel, social services director of the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission. The agency offers emergency assistance to people who can't pay rent or utility bills.

"Approximately 10 percent are people who never sought help from social service agencies before because their income was too high," Kloeppel said.

Last year, the organization's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program assisted about 5,200 households with one-time utility payments; this year, it had served more than 6,000 families by May 31.

Soaring Food Costs

In 2008, the consumer price index for food — a government measure of the cost of food — rose 5.5 percent, the largest increase since 1990, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The price index for food is expected to increase 3 percent to 4 percent this year.

Hall said if it weren't for government assistance and food stamps, "we'd be starving to death."

Across Champaign County, families like the Halls rely on food stamps, government aid programs and food banks for sustenance. Between 1989 and 2006, food stamp recipients nearly doubled in Champaign County — from 8,500 to nearly 16,000, according to Census data. The number of county public school students eligible for free or reduced lunches rose from 32 percent in 2001 to 44 percent in 2009, according to an analysis of Illinois State Board of Education data.

At Stone Creek Church's weekly food pantry in Urbana, 469 people sought food on June 15, nearly double the number served on May 18, Director Angela Bradley said. "During the summer, it's a peak time," she said. "That's because children who received free and reduced lunch are home."

"We feed people who have decent jobs, who drive decent cars, yet who are having a hard time making ends meet and need help with food," Bradley said. "They live paycheck to paycheck and if something unexpected arises — medical bills, car repairs, spousal loss of job or hours — it upsets the delicate balance. We see many people who are embarrassed that they need food." She said nurses and construction workers have been pantry clients.

For the Halls, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program also helps to put food on the table. The federal program provides coupons for supplemental food such as dairy products, cereals and beans to pregnant women or mothers and children up to the age of 5 who meet income guidelines. To qualify, a family of four can make no more than \$40,793. More than 25 percent of the county's families make less than \$35,000 a year, according to 2007 Census estimates.

WIC food aid is not just for the "poorest of the poor," said Brandon Meline, a program director at the Champaign-Urbana Public Health District. Many professionals, Meline said, such as a teacher who is a single parent or an entry-level salesperson, also qualify for help.

However, many people without dependent children do not qualify for government food assistance because they earn too much. According to federal guidelines, a household of two cannot earn more than \$1,167 a month after taxes to qualify for food stamps. Gaddis and his wife bring home a combined monthly income of between \$1,200 and \$1,400 at McDonald's.

"You can barely eat, but if you make too much, you can't apply for food stamps," said Gaddis, who eats meals at McDonald's, where he gets a 50-percent employee discount.

Downwardly Mobile

For many residents, low wages and high debt stand in the way of upward mobility, said Ruby Mendenhall, an associate professor of sociology and African American studies at the University of Illinois. Mendenhall's preliminary research on the earned income tax credit in Champaign County showed that only a small percentage were able to use their tax refund toward items that would improve the family's financial standing, such as a down payment on a home or attending college.

One in seven individuals and families filing tax returns in Champaign County in 2006 were low-wage workers who qualified for the earned income tax credit, according to The Brookings Institution, a public-policy think tank. The credit was available to individuals and families who earned between \$12,120 and \$38,348, depending upon family size. Mendenhall found that nearly 40 percent of low-wage earners in the study initially saved some portion of their tax refunds, which averaged around \$4,200. But the majority spent their refunds trying to catch up on overdue bills.

The tax credit "does help families come back from the financial abyss — the sea of bills and the creditors calling," Mendenhall said. "The little money that is left over, they use it for regular expenses and emergencies that come up."

Credit experts recommend that people have three months of basic living expenses saved in the event of emergencies such as job loss, illness or car repairs.

"If people don't have accumulated savings they can fall back on, it results in an impoverished situation," said Valerie McWilliams, directing attorney for Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation in Champaign. "Some people are choosing to borrow money either through credit cards or worse, payday loans, and aren't able to work themselves out of that situation."

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The biggest problem, Mendenhall said, is the gap between wages in the area and the rising cost of living. And as the economy worsens and employers forgo cost-of-living raises, Kloeppel said, "the gap is expanding."

A resident in Champaign County needed to earn \$13.15 an hour or a family of four needed to make \$32,000 a year to achieve a living wage, according to data analyzed by the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission in 2007. The organization defined a living wage as the amount needed to live without government assistance and spending no more than two-thirds of annual income on housing and utility bills.

But the average estimated mean wage for renters in Champaign County is \$9.43 an hour, according to the 2009 report on poverty by Heartland Alliance.

On July 1, the state raised the minimum wage to \$8 an hour, a 25-cent increase. The extra \$5 a week will help, but it probably won't be enough for Gaddis to rent an apartment or buy a car, he said. "It would be tight," he said, adding that he's not optimistic about finding a better-paying job. "Anything around here, about all they pay is minimum wage."

By [Shelley Smithson](#) and [Pam G. Dempsey](#)

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Picture by The News-Gazette/ Kelly Gaddis and his wife, Kelly, in their home in the Courtesy Motel in Urbana.

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Neighborhood Declines - And County Zoning Blocks Any Hope of Recovery

By Liz Clancy Lerner — It doesn't take much to get Tom Lemke fired up.

Just ask him about his neighborhood – a place he has called home for 63 years -- and his frustration is evident.

"They say we're a slum – run down. That's the way we've always been treated." Lemke said all this as he takes a deep breath into his oxygen mask. "We have really been abused . . . and we have really tried to take care of the area."



A rusty sign on the corner of Second Street and Wallace Avenue.

Lemke, 64, has chronic bronchitis and lives in Wilber Heights. It's a neighborhood where, according to Champaign County Planning and Zoning documents, homes "are not encouraged to survive."

Champaign County passed an ordinance in 1973 intending to turn the neighborhood into a strictly industrial region. The regulation prohibits the rebuilding of or substantial repair to any home.

However, almost 40 years later, houses and residents still remain.

In Wilber Heights abandoned homes sit next to recycling plants, which sit next to trash-filled lots that are adjacent to trailer homes – all of this within 36 acres.

"This wasn't a properly thought-out thing in the first place and it's so complicated that it's difficult to resolve at any time," said John Hall, the Champaign County Planning and Zoning Director.

In fact, it is so complicated that even the spelling of the neighborhood is controversial. Residents have always known it as "Wilbur" Heights, with a "u." County documents and a 1960 newspaper article deem the correct spelling "Wilber."

Clyde Forrest is a professor emeritus in planning and zoning at the University of Illinois and has known about the zoning issues in Wilber Heights for 30 years.

"I wouldn't categorize it as a terrible slum." said Forrest. "But it's an area that's not going to attract first-class residential development."

Residential development isn't the goal of the ordinance, which is why it contains rules against maintaining and rebuilding homes in Wilber Heights.

The Restrictions

Lemke is a retired mechanic and shares his home with his wife Velma. They raised their three children in Wilber Heights. Their home is a well maintained two-story structure, that at one time was the source of a lot of trouble for the Lemkes.

Eleven years ago a driver lost control of his car, crashing into the home's front porch and destroying it. Lemke was about to rebuild his porch when the Champaign County Planning and Zoning Department told him that he couldn't.

The zoning ordinance, deeming all homes non-conforming, prohibits any resident from adding on or renovating more than 10 percent of the replacement value annually.

This means that if a fire were to burn down a house in Wilber Heights, then the homeowner could not legally rebuild a home on their lot. And in Lemke's case, he could not legally replace his deck. So, following ordinance rules, he kept the renovation to 10 percent.

Three concrete steps now lead to the front door of his house. Aesthetically, it's not what he had wanted, but it is what the county demanded.

The restrictions also affect home prices because residents cannot substantially improve their homes. According to a 1992 planning and zoning document from former Champaign County Zoning Administrator, Frank DiNovio, "They are also unlikely to be able to realize a market value of their property very much greater than its current use value as a dwelling."

The size of the lots also prevents individuals from selling for much higher industrial property prices. "Industrial property is typically worth five times more than residential, but the homeowners would have to sell at the same time. If they sold one at a time, that wouldn't happen," said Clyde Forrest. But asking lifelong residents to move at the same time is not likely.

Yet, commercial properties have not been selling as well as residential properties because – much like residential mortgages – mortgages for commercial properties have not been as easily available as they once were, said Fred McDonald, president of Champaign County Association of Realtors.

While federal stimulus money has been used help jump-start residential property sales, it's not been available for commercial property, McDonald said.

"Commercial (property) now is a bigger concern," he said.

Wilber Heights and the surrounding area has been a good draw for business with its close proximity to Interstates 74, 57 and 52, said Matt Wavering a real estate agent with Coldwell Banker Commercial Devonshire Realty.

Because of that transportation hub, the city has pushed for higher industrial use in the Wilber Heights area, he said.

And as the area has developed into warehousing and industrial uses, property values have become low, Wavering said.

Houses in Wilber Heights have sold for less than \$50,000 compared to the median housing prices range between \$120,000 and \$130,000, he said.

Further, industrial property is the least valuable of commercial property, Wavering said.

Typically, industrial land in an industrial park will sell between \$1.50 and \$2 a square foot compared to retail property, which can sell for up to \$15 a square foot, he said.

Wilber Heights and Market Street are the cutoff between retail and industrial property, Wavering said.



Interactive Graphic — Click the image to learn the layout of the land and the history behind the community.

"On the industrial side, values are lower," he said.

If one of the area's rental properties stops generating rental income, then "the land becomes worth more than the house," Wavering said.

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Picture by:

Liz Lerner

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A Complicated Life: One woman's optimistic journey through poverty and strife

ADULT EDUCATION, POVERTY, YOLANDA DAVIS - By [CU Citizen Access](#) on Wednesday, March 3, 2010 - 13:13

CHAMPAIGN -- Yolanda Davis is no stranger to complications; with an estimated monthly income that ranges from \$600 to \$800, she is among the more than 32,000 Champaign County residents who live at or below the poverty line, according to data released by the U.S. Census Bureau in November 2009.

The report also states that poverty rates for Champaign County in 2008 rose to 18.7 percent, up from the 2007 rate of 18.2 percent. This series follows Champaign resident Yolanda Davis as she juggles three children, school and a life on less than \$26 a day. Produced by University of Illinois Journalism Graduate Student [Will Atwater](#).

Part One: A better future

Nov. 30, 2009 - The sound of explosives and automatic machine gun fire spilling from the TV doesn't seem to bother a snoring two-year-old D'aizit who sleeps at one end of the couch. But at the other end, Nicole Martin, a staff member of the Champaign County Urban and Regional Planning offices No Limits Program, seems distracted as she attempts to get through to First Call for Help, a family service agency that acts as an information referral program.

Part Two: Lessons in love

Born Dec. 16, 1975, Yolanda lived with her mother and two sisters on Chicago's Southside. As a young girl, she remembers frequent altercations with her mother that grew worse as she grew older. Yolanda finally decided to leave home as a young teenager. "I emancipated myself when I was 14 from my mom's care," she said. "She used to beat me for no apparent reason. I would never leave my kids with her if she was alive. I loved her because that was my mom. But me calling her mom, I could never do that. I would call her by her name or her nickname. That was not my mother. That couldn't have been the woman that put me on this earth."



Part Three: Rebellious past

While living in Evanston Yolanda met Anthony Foster at Fleetwood Jordan Park, which was near where they both lived. They spent time talking and playing basketball at the park and became close, she said. Soon Yolanda was pregnant with her first child. She was put in touch with a person who gave refuge to teenage mothers and was invited to live in the woman's home with her newborn, she said.

Part Four: Dark days

As a high school dropout with no job skills, Yolanda moved in with her paternal grandmother, who is now deceased. She struggled to earn money. Teen mothers are more likely to seek financial support from family or from public assistance and 75 percent of unmarried teen mothers go on welfare within five



Picture by: Will Atwater/ Yolanda Davis, left, with her children, pose for a photo recently in their southwest Champaign rental home.

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years of the birth of their first child, according to a March of Dimes study.



Part Five: Turning point

Around 1998 Yolanda developed a relationship with Izear Davis, whom she married and had two children with. But complications continued for her.

Part Six: First steps

Of her hardships, worrying about her children's welfare is the toughest. "Being on the street, being homeless, having to ask someone 'could you feed my kids?' Not knowing what's going to happen tomorrow, or [what] the next day after that is going to bring."

Part Seven: Tools to survive

Yolanda's resolve is being tested. She did not receive her monthly Illinois Link Card benefits last October.



Part Eight: Unresolved issues

Davis believes the issues Yolanda had with her late mothers are still not resolved. The death of her mother plays a big part in [Yolanda's] life ... as far as how she [acts] towards the kids because she does not want to treat [them] the way she was treated," he said.

Part Nine: The road less traveled

In December Yolanda's public aid benefits were reinstated and though she doesn't have a job currently, she is still in the No Limits program and continues to meet with Woodard on a regular basis. An Ameren IP representative was able to ignite the pilot light and Davis and her family have heat. Since Jan. 10, Yolanda has been attending adult education classes on a weekly basis and she has also enrolled in Even Start, an educational program for mothers and their children.

Q + A: Urbana Adult Education

Dr. David Adcock, director of Urbana Adult Education, located at 211 N. Race St. in Urbana, sat down to discuss the center and some of the educational opportunities offered there.

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Picture by Will Atwater/ Yolanda Davis, left, with her children, pose for a photo recently in their southwest Champaign rental home.

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Champaign County is home to tens of thousands of renters

HOUSING - By [CU Citizen Access](#) on Tuesday, January 19, 2010 - 16:00

CHAMPAIGN -- Rental property is big business in Champaign County.

With nearly 35,300 units, Champaign County has the highest percentage of occupied rental housing units among the state's metropolitan counties, according to 2008 Census Bureau estimates.

Yet rental inspection programs are inconsistent across the county with stark differences between programs in the cities of Champaign and Urbana and, except for Rantoul, little to no oversight elsewhere.

The inspections are designed to ensure that rental properties which include non-owner occupied single-family houses, duplexes and apartment-style buildings comply with fire safety codes as well as city and national maintenance and building codes.

But interviews with city officials and a review of county and city records show that:

* Nearly 4,800 residential rental properties 47 percent of the county's total rental properties are not subject to inspection. Just over 3,550 of those properties are in

* Champaign alone. The rest are in the county, which has no inspection program. When violations are discovered, landlords in Champaign and Urbana are routinely given months to make repairs.

* Landlords are rarely fined for violations, even after their cases are sent to the cities' legal departments for further action.

Housing advocates say low-income tenants who make up more than half the renters in the county are especially vulnerable because they don't always understand their legal rights or have the financial resources to resolve even basic housing problems such as bad plumbing, roof problems or lack of smoke detectors.

Esther Patt, director of the Champaign-Urbana Tenant Union, says the current systems are tilted in favor of landlords. Tenants have limited options to resolve housing violations, she said, while landlords are given several.

On the plus side, Patt said, many landlords make repairs as soon as a tenant reports a problem, and they work quickly to resolve code violations.

In many ways, though, "tenants are treated like second-class citizens," she said. "It's really as though [officials] believe that people who rent housing are not entitled to the blessings of liberty that homeowners consider their birthright."

Andrew Timms, vice president of the Central Illinois Apartment Association and owner of Spectra ART Enterprises, a property management company, disagreed. Tenants have adequate outlets to resolve housing problems, he said.

"It's simplifying the forces and issues [in regards to] providing safe housing to say it's tilted one side or another," Timms said.

Landlords are often stigmatized as villains, he said, but the "overwhelming majority" contribute positively to the community.

Champaign City Council member Tom Bruno thinks local government should have only a limited role in resolving tenant-landlord disputes. He said rental housing is a private transaction between consenting adults and should be treated the same as owner-occupied residences.

"Government doesn't necessarily need to be the vehicle that steps into the relationship between consenting adults and babysits the tenant," Bruno said. "How aggressive should the government be in playing a role in private contractual relationships, also known as a lease?"

There's not a lot of good affordable housing'

College students and low-income residents make up the bulk of the rental population in Champaign-Urbana, Patt said.

The "overwhelming majority of tenants here are either poor or students, and these are not the people anyone cares about (because) they're perceived as not voting," she said.

An estimated 70,000 renters live in the county, and more than half of them live on less than \$25,000 a year, according to 2008 Census data.

About 34,000 college students live off campus, according to data from the University of Illinois and the U.S. Census. There is no data to indicate exactly how many full-time students are renters.

Finding a place to live may be easier for students.

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Picture by: The News-Gazette/Clay Baier, housing inspector for the city of Urbana, prepares to inspect a single-family home in Urbana on Nov. 30, 2009 prior to a new tenant moving in.

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"Student rentals are very different than nonstudent rentals. The poor folks in this community are faced with a very different atmosphere," said Thomas Betz, director of the University of Illinois Student Legal Services, which advises students on issues such as traffic tickets, misdemeanors and landlord-tenant problems.

Students tend to have more money and may have parents who inspect rental properties before they sign a lease, said Betz, who also is a member of the Champaign County board.

There's now an oversupply of rental units, but most are high-end properties with high-end rent, Betz said. Students have a much better rental market to choose from and can be selective, he said.

For the low-income non-student tenant, it's a "much rougher environment," he said. "There's not a lot of good affordable housing."

"Tenants who are afraid don't complain"

Finding a rental house or apartment may be more difficult for low-income tenants, especially those who might have previous evictions and little money saved for a deposit.

"If you've got bad credit and you have evictions, especially if you have a criminal background, there are consequences to that," said Sally Stocks Eissfeldt, owner of Property Management People and a board member of the Central Illinois Landlord Association.

Inspections may either help or hinder low-income tenants, said Betz, the director of the university Student Legal Services.

If there's a water leak under your sink and you can live with it, he said, "you're not going to call a housing inspector."

"You're not sure you want a housing inspection because if (they) close it down, where are you going to live?" Betz said.

Even tenants with no evictions or criminal records may find it difficult to secure a place because many landlords require tenants to have an income that is at least three times the rent, Patt said.

Half of the county's tenants pay more than 30 percent of their household income to rent, according to 2008 Census data.

"When you finally find some place that will rent to you and it isn't a total dump ... '(you) sign the lease and be grateful for it' is the attitude a lot of people have," Patt said.

When problems do arise, most low-income renters are reluctant to file a complaint because they fear the place might be condemned, she said.

Still others may not file a complaint if they are illegal immigrants, speak little to no English or have no other place to live if their unit is condemned, officials said.

"Tenants who are afraid don't complain," said Sue Salzman, Champaign's longtime property maintenance supervisor who retired last fall.

In some cases, though, a tenant complaint is necessary to spur a landlord to make repairs, said John Roska, an attorney with Land of Lincoln, a legal aid service for low-income tenants.

"State law says as long as the situation is unsafe/uninhabitable, then the tenant can move out and hold the landlord liable," he said.

The law allows a tenant to move to a hotel or comparable apartment until the situation is repaired. The landlord may be responsible for the costs, but the tenant may have to pay those costs up front – money many low-income renters do not have, Roska said.

"It's a difficult proof process," he said. "And tenants have to give landlords some kind of notice."

Last May, more than 100 low-income tenants at Gateway Studios, 1505 N. Neil St., C., were forced out when the pay-by-the-week motel was condemned for lack of power and gas after its owners failed to pay more than \$44,000 in utility bills.

Though many received their rent back, dozens of people did not have the money to find a new place. Cash-poor social service agencies were able to provide some emergency assistance, despite the drain on resources.

Both Urbana and Champaign city officials are now looking at ways to help tenants forced out of housing by condemnations and who have no other place to live.

Landlords face obstacles, too

Patt said enforcement remains an issue.

"Landlords know there (are) no consequences to not meeting the deadline (for repairs) and that is why a lot of them don't do it," she said.

If code violations are corrected within six months, Champaign-Urbana officials consider it a "victory," Patt said, "because they are looking at buildings, not people."

But for the tenant who has waited months for repairs, "that stinks," Patt said.

Yet, city officials acknowledge that they prefer to work with landlords rather than fine them to resolve problems. Champaign City Council Marci Dodds said it's important to remember that landlords and city inspectors are people, too.

"If a landlord shows good faith, the city will work with them," she said.

Many landlords need that extra time because they are still recovering from the recent economic downturn, Timms said.

In the current economy, few landlords can make repairs just on the rents they collect, he said, and finding contractors to do the required work can take "weeks, sometimes months."

"No two situations regarding building safety codes are going to be identical," Timms said.

- Pam G. Dempsey and Lindsay Ignatowski

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