

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.

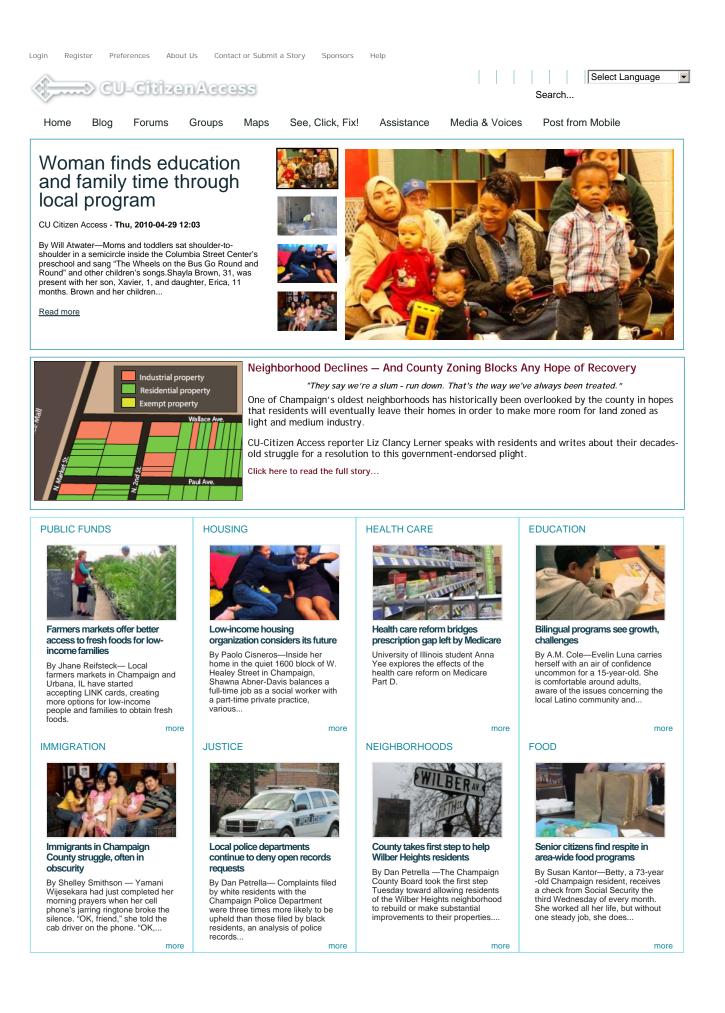
In May, CU-Citizen Access and the News-Gazette garnered first place for the Most Innovative Project in the 2009 Illinois Press Association News-Editorial Excellence Awards .



Marajen Stevick Foundation







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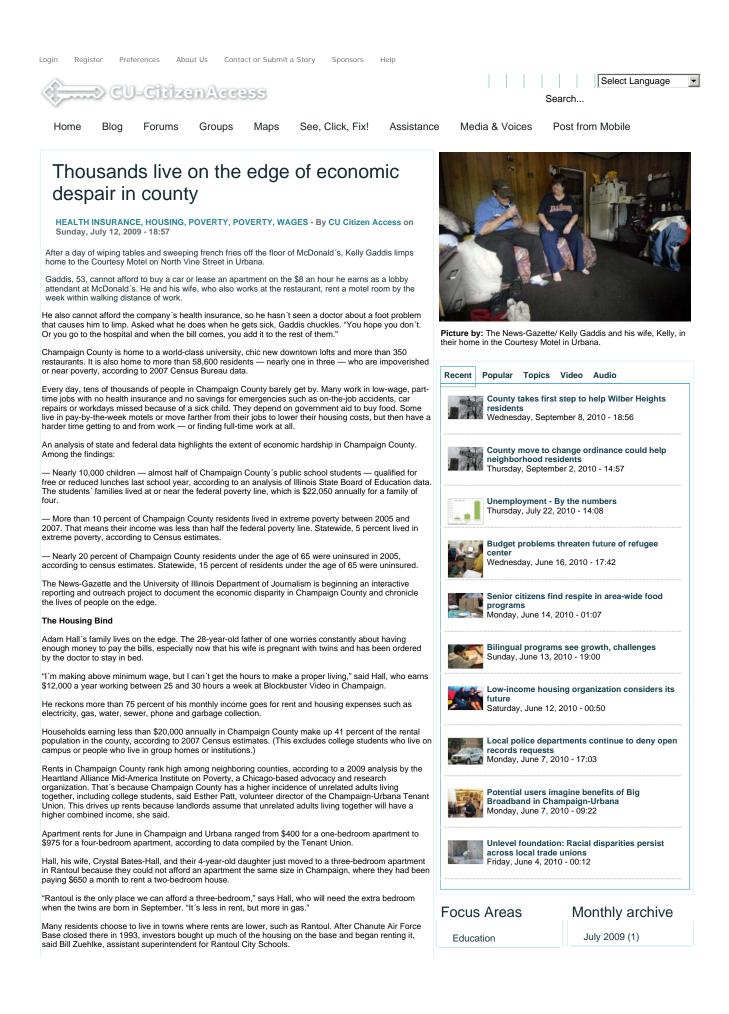
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Not everyone can make such a move, however. People who work in Champaign-Urbana and don't have transportation have to find housing here, said Lisa Vandermark, a housing counselor for the Tenant Union. She said credit problems prevent many landlords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

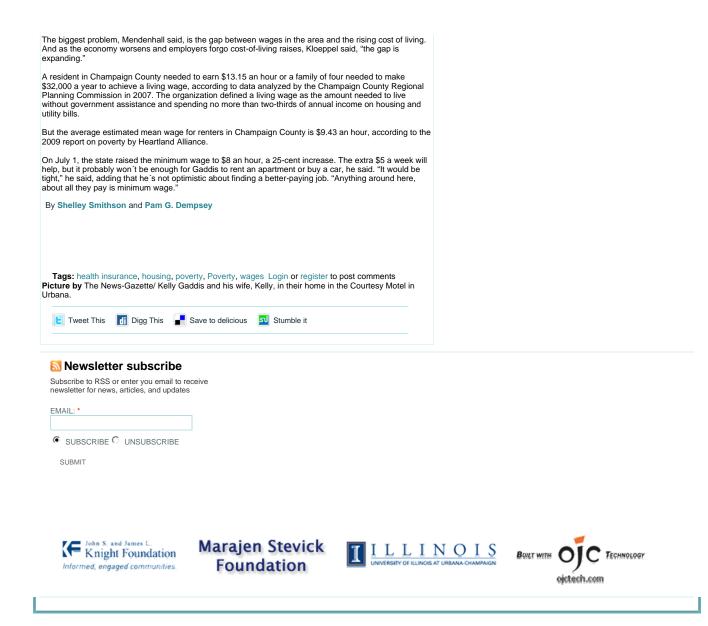
One in seven individuals and families filing tax returns in Champaign County in 2006 were low-wage workers who qualified for the earned income tax credit, according to The Brookings Institution, a public-policy think tank. The credit was available to individuals and families who earned between \$12,120 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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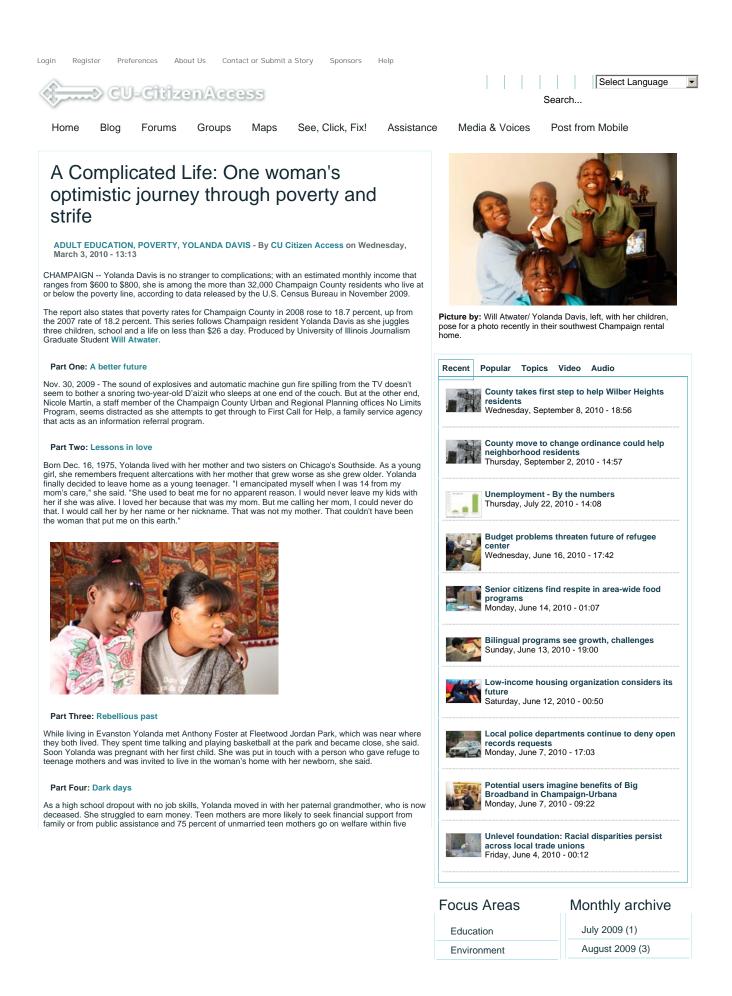




Typically, industrial land in an industrial park will sell between \$1.50 and \$2 a square foot compared to retail property, which can sell for up to \$15 a square foot, he said.

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









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.

Tags: adult education, Poverty, Yolanda Davis Login or register to post comments Picture by Will Atwater/ Yolanda Davis, left, with her children, pose for a photo recently in their southwest Champaign rental home.

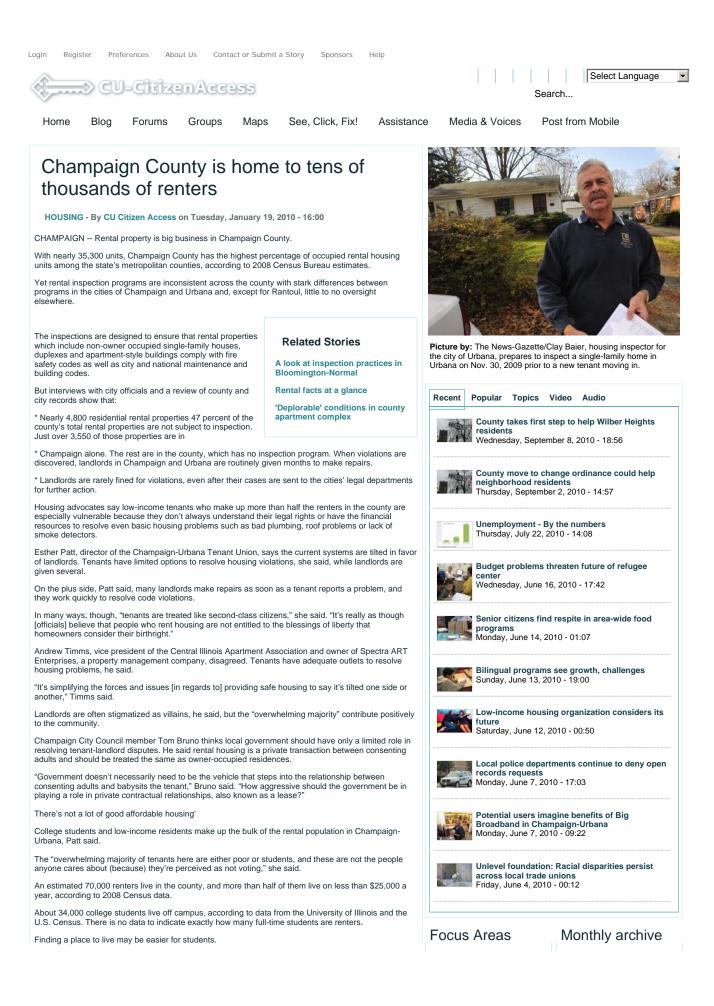


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"Student rentals are very different than nonstudent rentals. The poor folks in this community are faced with a very different atmosphere," said Thomas Betz, director of the University of Illinois Student Legal Services, which advises students on issues 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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