

## Housing crunch hits 107th hardest As rental prices soar, large families squeeze into tiny apartments

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is the worst side of Edmonton's housing crunch.

Immigrant families in the 107th Avenue area who can't afford their own places sometimes have no choice but to sleep on the floors of strangers' rooms.

By packing 11 people into an apartment meant for three or four -- without the landlord's permission -- they and their hosts are at risk of being evicted.

In the worst cases, employees at the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers say, families are forced to pay off their housing debts by working for free in exchange for a place to sleep -- all under the table, of course.

"It's a very grim story," says Jim Gurnett, executive director of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers.

"(Lack of housing) continues to be the biggest obstacle to people getting on with successful lives in this city. There are so many other problems that start to develop in your life if you don't have proper housing."

Once full of low-cost rental spaces, the 107th Avenue area used to be the best place in the city for immigrants to find an affordable place to live. But it's getting harder and harder for newcomers to find homes.

"Two or three years ago, we could find almost anyone a place they could afford within an afternoon of phoning around and taking them to see some places," Gurnett says. "Now, we're spending three days or more finding somebody (an affordable) place that's fit for a human to live in."

"And if they don't have our help, people just can't find it, period."

Like everywhere else in the city, rents have been steadily going up over the past few years.

Most of the people Gurnett's organization helps have a monthly income of about \$1,500.

The average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the neighbourhood is almost \$700.

Meanwhile, more and more rental properties are being converted to condos,

especially in the Queen Mary Park neighbourhood.

"There is a gentrification taking place," Gurnett explains.

Robert McLeod is a Remax realtor who does a lot of his business in Queen Mary Park. He has seen the condo market take off.

"People like that it's a mature, established area," he says. "They're looking for proximity to transportation and the downtown core. There's not any more crime than there is downtown, and it's cheaper as well.

"I'm selling mostly to first-time buyers between 24 and 32."

Gurnett says he doesn't have a problem with condos going up, but not if it means affordable housing is lost.

"I don't begrudge the people who want to make a start in housing," he says. "But as the owners of the properties cater to those people and convert buildings to condos, the people who are being pushed out are the people who just arrived in Edmonton, have no resources and no assets.

"They've just lost the one affordable option that they've traditionally had around here."

City hall is aware of the risk, says downtown city councillor Ben Henderson, and any revitalization projects will include housing considerations.

"Even as you're building new stuff in there, there will be an expectation that there would be a minimum amount of affordable housing put in," he says.

"One of the things that's really exciting about that whole area is that it is a melting pot of different immigrant communities, and I would hate to see that lost."

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