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Some single-income renters struggle to stay afloat in Lafayette

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Photo J. Wake

When Sunita Shastri's apartment manager suggested she leave her name off the lease of her unit when she and her husband and two children downsized from a two to a one-bedroom place in 2019, it seemed like no big deal. But when Shastri, who is in the final stages of divorce, tried to take over the lease in 2021, management told her she'd first need to vacate and reapply. "I asked my manager where we should go with my kids and my stuff while I waited and she shrugged her shoulders," Shastri recalls. "She seemed to think `it's not my problem."

Shastri reached out to the apartment in Lafayette that has low income units and placed herself on the waiting list. When she recently checked on her waitlist status, she was number 200. Shastri has also reached out to the Contra Costa County Family Justice Center, which can waitlist her for housing in places like Concord, Martinez or Antioch, but not Lafayette.

"It's easy for people to say that you should just leave Lafayette if you can't afford it," says Shastri, who is a preschool teacher in Moraga and whose children attend Lafayette Elementary School. "As a single mom, I can't just pack up and move. It's taken me a long time to build a support network in this community, who help me with caring for my kids, and my job is very important to me." Shastri doesn't think she should have to leave a

community that she loves.

"I've been looking at two-bedroom units in Lafayette. Most of the leasing agents say I have to prove that I earn two to three times more than the cost of the rent," Shastri says. "I've tried negotiating a few times and the landlords tell me that it's fixed (and that their hands are tied because of the market rate)."

Shameka, a single mom of three who asked that we not use her full name, has been a catering manager in Moraga for over a decade, but has never been able to live in the Lamorinda area. Pre-pandemic, Shameka lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Antioch with a total of nine other people. To be on time before she had access to a car, Shameka departed before sunrise. During the pandemic when Shameka's hours were cut, she lost her apartment and found herself couch surfing and in some cases sleeping in her car.

"It was hard. It was really hard," Shameka recalls. "Some days I broke down and cried and then I thought about my children. That's what kept me going."

While Shameka would love to have the option of living in a community like Lafayette for the sake of her kids' education and the close proximity to her job, it's a nearly unimaginable idea for her. Shameka's hopes are simple yet profound: "Just to be stable."

Natalie Oleas, the Family Justice Center's central director, says struggles like these are commonplace in the Bay Area: "We've seen a lot of single parent households struggling and a lot of people staying in situations where DV (domestic violence) is a factor and where their safety is at risk simply because they have no place to go."

The Family Justice Center is a hub where clients can get resources and support relating to anything from legal services to counseling to assistance applying for and accessing health and human resources benefits like food stamps. In the housing realm, outside of connecting clients with low-income listings that often have long waitlists and in some cases offering temporary financial assistance, Oleas says finding a long-term solution is complicated.

"We try to get creative and explore ways that clients can be resourceful like staying with family members (if they have family in the area) or renting along with another single parent," Oleas says.

Jeremy Levine is the director of Inclusive Lafayette, a volunteer community group that focuses on local inclusive housing. Levine says it's tragic that the people who teach children, provide service and care for the

community can't afford to live in the community.

While Levine says there's not necessarily an immediate solution for renters who are being priced out, he's hopeful about the city's commitment to bring more housing to Lafayette in the years to come. "The more people we have of different backgrounds (and life experiences) living in Lafayette, the better the community will be," Levine says.

Lafayette City Council Member Wei-Tai Kwok says accessible and affordable housing is a cornerstone to building an inclusive Lafayette, but it is not necessarily an easy issue to tackle.

"Homeowners no doubt are delighted by rising home values, but existing renters are not fans of rising rents," Kwok says. "The growing economic gap between the `haves' and the `have-nots' is not good for society and so personally I favor efforts to achieve a more diverse housing supply from low to median levels."

Kwok and Levine agree that while addressing housing insecurity in Lafayette is of the utmost importance, figuring out the best way to do it is the challenge. With \$400 per square foot construction costs, even a 500 square foot unit with free land would cost \$200,000 to build.

"Success will require multiple funding sources, including federal, state or local monies, nonprofit contributions, and private enterprises," Kwok says.

For now, housing advocates are looking at ideas ranging from raising local taxes to implementing vacancies taxes or partnering with nonprofits. Meanwhile, people like Shastri and Shameka are doing their best to hold onto jobs in Lamorinda with dreams of a stable place in the community to lay their heads each evening.

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