



Severe Regional Housing Shortage Impacting International Newcomers

By Joy Brown

The average U.S. hotel room measures about 300 square feet, or the size of a typical single-car garage, according to SiteMinder, an international software platform that serves lodging businesses. Think about it – the beds, a table, a chair or two, countertops, dressers, a mini fridge, a TV, and other physical amenities take up significant space. Then, add 10 people with their possessions (however few those may be). Rather than a hypothetical situation, this is the type of home life that hundreds of international newcomers have found themselves in once they arrive in Findlay, Ohio.

Many of the city’s hotels have been housing adult migrants and, in some cases, their children, long term, for months or even years at a time. The adults living in one room may have different jobs with different schedules. Their school-age children, crammed in with so many others, must try to complete homework in a language they may not understand. Everyone must find ways to sleep, bathe, eat, and otherwise peacefully coexist.

Local service providers say many of these individuals comprise entire families who fled from their home countries, fearing for their lives. With affordable housing options nearly nonexistent for years for anyone living in Hancock County, no matter their nationality, thousands of newcomers, seeking a roof over their heads, work, and safety have resorted to hotel room accommodations.

Service providers are helping newcomers as much as they can. Their overarching approach is to “treat humans as humans,” which also remains a guiding philosophy of the Immigration Task Force, a consortium of government, nonprofit, education, health, and faith-based leaders who for months have been examining ways to maximize systemic efficiencies to better acclimate and serve migrants.

As with most other areas within the U.S., affordable housing continues to present a conundrum. Housing officials say the COVID-19 pandemic complicated the problem in many ways, but so did the subsequent “seller’s market” that encouraged several property owners to sell at significant profit. Rental housing that had once been affordable started to skyrocket. It wasn’t uncommon to see rents more than double, housing advocates say.

A third factor that's compounding the housing shortage – is the success of regional economic development efforts. New warehouses and distribution centers have fueled job growth in recent years. But, while a workforce increase is viewed by business and government leaders as a community success story, it has also inadvertently exacerbated the housing problem.

According to the Findlay-Hancock County Affordable Housing Alliance (AHA), 99.6% of housing in the county is occupied.

“Housing availability is at record lows among all housing types and price points,” the AHA outlines in its 2024-2029 Housing Strategy. “An overall vacancy rate of one percent adversely impacts low-to-moderate-income (LMI) households (a healthy market has a 5% vacancy rate). Without housing options and constraints on rental-assisted funds, (economic) mobility is severely limited among residents and workers, bolstering an increasingly unhoused population.”

Findlay-based Hope House, which provides rental assistance to those who are facing homelessness and offers transitional communal shelter for homeless women and children, said the current housing situation is extremely tight.

At an August AHA meeting, Hope House reported that 345 immigrants had reached out to the organization asking for assistance with finding a place to live.

“In the past 90 days, we’ve worked with 149 people. We are not able to track the number that walk in the door, so we are unable to help but estimate this to be in the hundreds. These numbers are astronomical,” said housing resource navigator Laurie Casati. “Private landlords are utilized most frequently for the immigrant population because the criteria to get into an apartment complex is much stricter. Complexes want a one-year rental history and a high credit score, or a co-signer. Meanwhile, it is not uncommon for them to need \$7,000 up front by the time they pay the first and last month’s rent and a deposit while also paying \$1,600 a month for a hotel room alongside trying to send money to family members back home. It’s a vicious cycle.”

Many migrants are living in hotel rooms because they’ve fallen between the cracks, making too much at their jobs to qualify for rental assistance but also unable to find, afford, or qualify for a rental apartment or house on their own. AHA members say the complexities of renting create big barriers for international newcomers, many of whom have had no permanent address in the U.S., let alone rental history, credit score, security deposit, a suitable lease co-signer, or enough English language skills to even decipher the unfamiliar American housing system.

Moreover, most migrants don’t know how utility billing systems work, either in terms of consumption or payment. Hope House representatives say some don’t know where to begin when it comes to setting up an account online. Once they establish an account, how the system works can present another enigma. Some are shocked when they realize that cranking up the air conditioning during the hottest days has caused their monthly bill to spike. Some simply don’t know that services such as gas and electricity must be paid monthly.

City Mission, a low-barrier emergency shelter in Findlay that provides free food, shelter, and connection to other resources on a short-term basis, is often at capacity.

Habitat for Humanity builds homes for individuals who live in substandard housing and meet income and other eligibility requirements. The homes feature affordable mortgage payments with 0% interest loans. But, once an application is approved, the waiting period can take months or more than a year, depending on factors such as construction schedules and funding sources. The Findlay organization has a waiting list.

Hotel living is more simplified than renting or even buying, yet it's the least ideal. "It's not sustainable. It's not a healthy situation and it's not how we want others to live," said Rebecca Padron, homeless services program supervisor at Hope House. "They're grateful to have a roof over their heads," she said. "They're grateful to be in a position in which their lives are no longer in constant danger," but they want better for themselves and their families.

Hope House takes calls and advises newcomers, referring them to other nonprofits and service agencies, if warranted, but has been able to provide financial assistance to a minimal number of migrants. "The overwhelming number of immigrants who are coming to our door for assistance are making too much to qualify for our core programming," said CEO Sue Lehman.

And most migrants coming to Findlay aren't looking for handouts, Lehman believes. They're just trying to figure it all out," she said.

Even when Hope House can't provide funding to help with rent or finding a home outside of a hotel, it does provide kindness.

"I believe we have a reputation for truly caring about people and their situations," Lehman maintained. "They come to our agency, and they see a friendly face. That positive voice, that linking of arms, that hearing of, 'We'll figure it out together and here's how,' works.

Ways you can help:

Volunteer with Hope House. Answer the door for visitors and residents, take phone calls, and contact "on-call" staff for emergencies as a shelter volunteer. Shifts are on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.; 12-3 p.m.; 3-6 p.m.; and 6-9 p.m. Sign up for one or more shifts as your schedule allows. To get started, provide your information here: <https://findlayhopehouse.org/volunteer/>

Donate to Hope House: <https://findlayhopehouse.networkforgood.com/projects/108304-hope-house-general-donation>

Sign up through Hope House to give to local grocery rewards programs (Hope House coordinates with Great Scot supermarkets and Kroger); host your own fundraiser; or host a donation drive. For ideas and more information, visit: <https://findlayhopehouse.org/donate/wish-list/>

Donate to or volunteer with City Mission: <https://www.findlaymission.org/>

Donate to or volunteer with Habitat for Humanity: <https://habitatfindlay.org>