

HOMEWORK? MANY KIDS HAVE NO HOME

Abrupt changes to housing can impact up to 10% of students in the city school district during the school year

Erica Bryant

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Three broken televisions sat in the yard of the property on Seward St., a house that was renting for \$1,075 a month. JoJo Langill, who has spent months without a home, took her two children on two buses to check out the place.

The man who promised to show the house never showed up. A text message said he was “knee deep in sewage at different apartment,” Langill said. Langill looked on the bright side. It was a weekday, so the No. 9 bus had stopped right in front of the the Coldwater House for Women and Children, the supportive housing program for homeless families where they are living. On weekends the bus doesn’t go out that far into Gates and the family would have had to walk to 35 minutes to catch the bus.

There were many visible problems with the property, but Langill said it had probably looked nice back in the day. “I like the clothesline,” she said, as her children Samuel, 13 and Chiffon, 11, sat in the shade of the porch.



JoJo Langill, who spent months without a home, waits in vain for a man who promised to show her a house she hoped to rent. Her children Samuel, 13, and Chiffon, 11, sit on the porch. ERICA BRYANT/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



TIME TO EDUCATE

TIME TO EDUCATE: HOMELESSNESS

Instability as a way of life

More than 2,800 Rochester City School District students — 1 in 10 — were reported to have experienced homelessness at some point during the 2018-2019 school year. The true number is, without doubt, higher. With aging housing stock and entrenched poverty, safe, affordable housing options

has become part of the mission of the schools and the district. Front desk staff at schools are trained to look for signs that a family might be homeless, like a change of address form for busing, for example. The district’s Families in Transition program is dedicated to the needs of homeless families and has a large room filled with clothing, book bags and other items that may be lost during an abrupt move. Social workers

are very limited. For many, housing instability has become a way of life.

“People are moving constantly trying to find a place they can afford,” said Carly Rae Jelsma, the Wellness Center Coordinator at School 8.

Langill works at Ridge Donut Cafe in Irondequoit, filling orders and occasionally filling doughnuts. Her hours vary from week to week and she estimates that she earns about \$1,800 a month.

In the past decade or so, Langill and her children have lived in apartments on Central Park, Renier Street, Norton Avenue, Lyndhurst Street and Thurston Avenue. In some cases they moved to avoid rising rents. In others, they were trying to escape poor living conditions. They left their most recent apartment after the lease was up because it was too small, too expensive and had an unsettling gas smell, said Samuel. Langill put down a \$1,400 deposit on a different apartment. As soon as she handed over the money, her real estate contact disappeared.

“I got beat out of money,” she said.

Scammed out of a month’s salary

Housing scams have become very common, as dishonest people capitalize on a widespread desperation for affordable housing, said Tamara Howard, program coordinator for Coldwater House for Women and Children. “Families are scraping up money to put these deposits down and it’s fake, it’s a scam,” she said. “That’s how JoJo got here.”

Having lost nearly a month’s salary, she was unable to come up with another deposit. She moved her family into the Country Inn and Suites in Henrietta, which cost \$84 a night. The kids enjoyed that experience because it had a pool and free breakfasts and Wi-Fi. The “minivacation,” as Langill called it, couldn’t last forever. A friend told them about Coldwater House, which Open Door Mission opened to provide assistance to a growing number of homeless mothers and children.

Samuel and Chiffon say they have enjoyed living in the building, which is in a former convent on Coldwater Road. Chiffon likes the macaroni and cheese dinners and her brother likes the computers. They have made friends with two younger children, whose mother, Deborah Henry, is trying to break a cycle of housing instability that began during her own childhood.

offer families advocacy, case management and much needed emotional support. FIT Director Elizabeth Reyes said that mothers will come in sobbing because they came home to find the locks changed on their homes and were not allowed to retrieve baby pictures and other irreplaceable items. “It breaks your heart,” Reyes said.

What is painful for adults can be worse for children, who have little to no control over their circumstances. Schools in Rochester, and across the state, are trying to help children deal with the stress they endure when they lose their homes. In New York City, where the numbers of children in temporary housing have topped 100,000 for four consecutive years, some schools have enlisted outside counseling agencies to help their students.

Tutoring is part of the programming at Coldwater House as well.

Langill’s kids say they like it there. Langill is still hoping to find an apartment. She has been paying \$119 a month to store their belongings and friends are keeping their turtle. Her ultimate dream is to own her own home.

“I look at the things that have happened to me as a learning experience,” she said. “What knocks me down just brings me back twice as strong.”

She looked through the windows of the locked house on Seward, which later was taken off the rental market when its owner decided to sell. Her daughter said she’d like to stay at Coldwater, because of the friends she’d made there. Her son said he liked staying in the hotel, and at Coldwater, but would be happy in a new apartment as well. “I don’t even care, as long as we’ve got a place.”

EBRYANT@Gannett.com.

Henry had moved at least five times before she was 10 years old. Her favorite place was an apartment on Grand Avenue, where it was sunny and kids jumped double dutch on the street. At 10 she was placed into foster care. She said her home life was never “a homey family type thing.” After seven foster care placements, she was finally adopted.

Henry would like to provide better for her two children, who are 4 and 7 years old. The family became homeless after an eviction and she lost all of her possessions. She was living with family members, when she sought help from counselors at School 8, where her youngest child was attending pre-K.

Wellness Center Coordinator Carly Rae Jelsma was saddened by the family’s plight, but not surprised. Dozens and dozens of families at School 8 were homeless this year, due to landlord issues, evictions, and unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions.

“They go from a home to a home to a home,” said Jelsma. “These are not safe properties, they are not stable, some of them are barely taken care of.”

Abrupt moves upset schooling

Helping such families meet their basic needs



Jojo Langill and her son Samuel look inside of a house on Seward Street that they were hoping to rent. The rental agent did not show up, saying he was “knee deep in

Jojo Langill and her son Samuel look inside of a house on Seward Street that they were hoping to rent. The rental agent did not show up, saying he was “knee deep in sewage” at another property. PHOTOS BY ERICA BRYANT/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Langill and her children peek in the window of a home on Seward Street. They are looking for affordable housing, but struggle to find a rental property that is in good condition.