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Trapped, she can't move without risking homelessness



By Mina Lukas, [Reprinted Special to the Wichita Eagle](#) December 27, 2023

“Why don’t you just move?”

It’s a question I hear a lot. I live in an unsafe apartment building with an abusive landlord.

Sometimes the question is spoken aloud, but more often, it’s there in peoples’ wanting-to-be-helpful-but-also-kind-of-judgmental silences.

And I get it. We've all asked different flavors of the same question, when we see people panhandling, or sleeping rough, or trapped in abusive relationships, or caught in addiction:

"Why don't they just . . . get a job?"

"Why don't they just . . . go to a shelter?"

"Why don't they just . . . leave him?"

"Why don't they just . . . quit?"

"Why don't they just . . . ?"

Short answer: it's complicated.

Anyone who's been through any of the things I just mentioned will tell you that it's never as simple as "just."

When I moved back to Wichita several years ago, my planned resources fell through and I found myself homeless.

But I was lucky: the counselors and case workers at the Salvation Army Womens' Shelter helped me navigate the endless benefit applications, get disability for my chronic illness, and eventually find temporary housing.

But even with all that help and support, I was still on the waiting list for three years before I could get my permanent housing voucher.

That's about average. Voucher wait times can be much longer, depending on your city and the current real estate climate.

But I did finally get my voucher. And once I had that tentative stability, I could start trying to build my life back up again.

Two decades later, I'm still trying.

Why so long? It's not that there aren't any resources out there (although, since the pandemic, the already-scant assistance is dwindling fast). It's more the fact that in Wichita, being eligible for help doesn't guarantee that you can actually access it.

Case in point: I lost my car when I became homeless, and I still can't afford to replace it. Without a car in this town, you are dead in the water.

Public transportation in Wichita is a joke compared to most other mid-sized cities, and a huge chunk of the programs that help low-income folks — from food banks to dental clinics to job training — require you to travel where or when the buses aren't running.

And you can practically see your hopes of finding a job die in your interviewer's eyes when they hear that you don't have flexible transportation.

It's a vicious cycle: you can't get a job without a car, and you can't afford a car without a job. Throw disability and chronic illness into the mix, and it puts both goals even farther out of reach.

I did some research, though, and found two places in Wichita that supposedly offer help with getting a vehicle.

The first told me that single women with no children almost never get chosen for assistance. I still haven't heard back from them.

The man at the second place gave me a 15-minute lecture about how easy it was for him — an able-bodied young white male with no health problems — to get any job he wanted, with only his bike for transportation.

It's worth noting that on my income, I can't afford a bicycle, either. I didn't need a car from him, he said. All I needed to do was "try harder".

So. With no job and no transportation, I'm stuck in my unsafe housing.

And while it beats the heck out of sleeping on the sidewalk, it's not the way you'd want anyone to live in a city as wealthy as Wichita.

The roof leaks. There are holes in the ceiling that let insects, rain, and cold air into my living room. There is wood rot in the floors and ceilings.

When I ask my landlord to come fix anything, he's likely to throw a screaming tantrum, blame me for the problem, and try to evict me. During his latest episode of Anger Management Theater, he destroyed the air vent in my living room and tried to force the Housing Authority to cancel my voucher, all because I had a window open

for some fresh air.

So why don't I just report him? Why don't I just move? Why don't I just . . .?

The Wichita Housing Authority does have certain standards to protect their tenants — on paper, at least. In practice, reporting your landlord means that you have to move out immediately, and pay all moving costs out of your own pocket. The time limit to save up enough money for a deposit and first month's rent, find a new apartment, and completely relocate is 60 days.

Sixty. Days.

There is absolutely no financial safety net for Housing Authority tenants in this situation. If the landlord is at fault, the tenant is punished. If you don't have the money to move, or you can't find a new place in the allotted time, then you lose the voucher that you worked so hard and waited so long to get, and you'll most likely end up back on the streets.

Another equally terrifying reason that I don't "just" move is that most of the resources that helped me out of homelessness no longer exist today.

The Salvation Army Womens' Shelter just closed its doors this year.

Clients of the Kansas Department for Children and Families don't get dedicated case workers anymore; each individual problem is handled by whoever happens to pick up the phone.

I can't afford to move. I don't want to be homeless again. So I stay in this unsafe, unhealthy situation.

Every night, I go to sleep with the prayer, "Dear Lord, please don't let the roof collapse on me while I'm asleep." And every morning, I wake up with the knowledge that today might be the day my landlord finally invents a reason to evict me, and sends me back to a life with no home and no hope.

I'm not giving up, though. I'm still trying, and trying to try harder.

Editor's note: This is one in a series of guest columns by Wichita-area residents to tell their stories, in their words, spotlighting barriers that deter full participation in the life of the community. Funding for Unheard Voices has been provided by the American Press Institute through its Civic Discourse and Community Voices Fund.

Last updated on March 30, 2024.

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