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Hotels become homes for families struggling to survive

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For families on the brink of economic ruin, this is as far as they ever hope to fall -- a single room at Value Place on Pendleton Pike that Jerry Bailey's family of four calls home.

The Baileys landed at the hotel after they were unable to sell their home in Lawrence and lost it to foreclosure. Today, the 58-year-old former chief technology officer for the city of Fort Wayne and his wife, Sherry, 53, daughter, Shari, 15, and son, Brian, 8, live in a single room with two double beds.

The adults sleep on one bed and the children on the other. The room has no closets, so they keep their clothes and belongings in 13 suitcases and boxes.

A growing number of hard-working, hard-luck families are ending up in this position, living week to week, month to month, at Value Place and scores of other properties like it, after a parent has lost a job, a home or an apartment as the recession drags on.

According to a recent report from the National Center on Family Homelessness, about one in 50 schoolchildren across the country is living in a motel or shelter, or with friends and relatives. And their numbers are growing. Although it's difficult to get exact figures, schools nationwide reported an 18 percent jump in homeless children in the 2007-08 school year.

In Marion County, at least 200 schoolchildren lived in motels last year, and 2,600 others were staying with relatives or other families, according to estimates by school officials and the local Coalition for Homeless Intervention and Prevention, or CHIP. No official count of that population had been done in the past. Meanwhile, 213 Marion County families were living in shelters, on the street or in transitional housing in 2008, an increase from 120 the year before.

The rooms at Value Place -- the basic rate is \$239 a week for a two-bed room or \$799 a month -- come with a full-size refrigerator, cupboards and a two-burner stove. Internet access is free.

But privacy and space are at a premium.

To eat, Bailey, his wife and daughter sit on their beds, plates in their laps. Brian sits on the floor. "A towel is his tablecloth," Bailey said.

The family's belongings -- 26,000 pounds of furniture -- are in storage, where they have amassed a running tab of \$15,000.

The hotel is filled with neighbors in the same boat. One summed up the situation:

"We are back to square one; we are basically homeless," said Teresa Rowe, 36, who lives at Value

Place with her husband, James Rowe, 48, and their daughter.

Outside the system

Traditionally, the focus of social-service programs and government dollars aimed at helping the homeless has been on people living on the streets and in shelters. But there always has been a sizable, overlooked population of people on the brink, said Tim Joyce, executive director of CHIP.

Motel dwellers and others staying with relatives and friends sometimes are referred to as the hidden homeless. They generally don't receive the assistance that the homeless do in finding transitional or subsidized housing.

"They're not in the system," Joyce said. "To get in the system, you generally have to land at a shelter."

Schools, however, know where the hidden homeless are because federal law requires that they provide children with transportation.

Crystal Haslett, a program coordinator for Washington Township Schools, where 10 students lived in hotels last year, said school districts allow students to remain in their schools even if their families have moved into a hotel outside the district.

"That minimizes the disruption for the family," she said. "They've got enough stress living in a motel or with another family."

Haslett said school bus drivers also try to reduce stress for the students.

"They pick them up first in the morning and drop them off last in the afternoon so the other children don't know where they live."

Wayne Township Assistant Superintendent Mary Ann Dewan said these students often need help of some sort, including tutoring and counseling.

"They miss school during their living transitions and fall behind," she said. "They are sleep-deprived, and depression is probably their biggest issue."

Finding a way out

At the four-story Value Place, about one-third of the guests have children, so "I always make sure I have freeze pops and candy around," building manager Joe Ordower said.

The hotel arranges food-pantry trips for about seven of its residents. Three other residents work at the hotel.

Ordower said he tries to point residents to social services for which they might qualify and keeps them apprised of job fairs.

But none of that makes living there any more pleasant.

Like many of her neighbors, former Indianapolis Public Schools teacher Kathy Valentine, who has

lived at Value Place for 10 months, is trying hard to get out.

Despite working 40 hours at an insurance company, Valentine and her son, Tyler, 15, are stuck.

She was evicted from her last apartment and has an unpaid utility bill, so it has been difficult to find an apartment. Even if she found a forgiving landlord, it would be next to impossible to save for the deposit any time soon.

"Half my check goes to the rent here, the other half to food," said Valentine, who lost her Eastside home in 2003 after her adjustable-rate mortgage payments doubled. "This is a transition phase, and it's hard to guess what happens next. I've learned -- one minute you are standing on top of the world driving an Infiniti QX, and the next you're down to the basics."

And the Baileys?

Jerry Bailey worked for a time as a night security guard for the hotel in exchange for free rent. Now he works in maintenance at Bishop Chatard High School so Shari can get free tuition.

Bailey had a difficult time finding work as a computer specialist when he came to Indianapolis four years ago, and he doesn't hold out much hope for a job in the field now.

"Let's face it -- at my age it's hard to get hired," he said. "People are getting laid off all over, including fathers with children, and everyone is looking for work and a place to live."