

From fire chief to mail clerks, no one seems able to find housing on Martha's Vineyard

By [Zoe Greenberg](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 5, 2021, 2:43 p.m.



Lynette Grant posed for a portrait across the street from where she works as a mail clerk at the Oak Bluffs Post Office. Grant cannot find a single place on the island where she can afford to live. She is now paying \$1,000 a week for a room at the Island Inn, where she has been living with her four children for almost a month. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

MARTHA'S VINEYARD — Lynette Grant lit a cigarette in the hour between her day job and night job and tried to relax. She had recently begun working as a mail clerk at the Oak Bluffs Post Office, and she was closer than ever to a better life.

Her only obstacle: She cannot find a place she can afford to live on the island. She is now

paying about \$1,000 a week for a room at the Island Inn, where she has been living with her three young children for a little more than a month. Her oldest son recently joined the other three, taking on two jobs to help with costs.

“I came here for a chance,” said Grant, 43, who is also working night shifts at Back Door Donuts. She has posted in Facebook groups, scoured the Chamber of Commerce site, called the Housing Authority, talked to business owners. She even considered moving to the local campground for the summer — but was told it’s full.

A housing problem long simmering on Martha’s Vineyard has reached its boiling point this year, and people in Grant’s position are almost as easy to find as Help Wanted signs in local windows. The situation has accelerated to the point that it is increasingly affecting year-round workers with middle-class salaries: people who keep the island running as postal clerks, teachers, pharmacists, and plumbers.

The lack of housing has separated families and left businesses scrambling for employees. And its consequences have widened to encompass almost everyone: Even the new Oak Bluffs fire chief can’t find an affordable place to live.

“The housing crisis is so off the rails that our infrastructure is collapsing,” said Laura Silber, the coordinator of the Coalition to Create the Martha’s Vineyard Housing Bank, which is pushing to create a fund for affordable housing by taxing high-end real estate sales.

Other steps that could make a difference include changing zoning laws to allow multi-unit housing, developing higher-density affordable housing, passing new regulations that would make it easier to build, and creating incentives for year-round rentals, according to a recent [Housing Needs assessment](#) by the Martha’s Vineyard Commission. But each potential solution has its own obstacles, and none would bring immediate relief.

The longstanding “island shuffle” — in which year-round residents pay less for winter rentals and more for summer ones — has given way this year to far more urgent

dislocations. Housing is extraordinarily scarce, both because [mainlanders have poured in](#) since the pandemic began and because in recent years Airbnb spurred homeowners to convert long-term rentals into short-term ones, residents and housing advocates said. Only 38 percent of island housing is available for people to live in year-round, according to the housing assessment.

The prices of the few places that are available have soared. The median home price in Duke's County from January through May of this year was \$1.15 million, according to the real estate data firm [Link MV](#) — a 58 percent increase from the same time period in 2019.

For renters, the situation is equally prohibitive. One of the only places Grant could find was a three-bedroom advertised at \$12,000 per month.

Facebook groups that once helped people find [long-term rentals](#) are instead filled with frantic pleas: *"I am desperately in search of housing for my 7yo son, myself and our [dog]," ... "I'm going to be homeless July 1..." "My new employee arrives today but still has not been able to find a place..."*

The predicament has created unexpected hardships, with some families having to split up and others choosing to flee the island entirely. Kristen Jenkinson, a clerk at Leslie's Pharmacy who grew up on the island, is paying \$1,000 a month for a room in Oak Bluffs. But she had to send her son, a senior in high school, to stay with a friend's family nearby, because she could not find an affordable place for them both.



Kristen Jenkinson, a clerk at Leslie's Pharmacy who grew up on the island, is paying \$1,000 for a room in Oak Bluffs. But she had to send her son, Aiden Rogers, a senior in high school, to stay with a friend's family nearby, because she could not find an affordable place for them both. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

“It’s horrible. I hate it,” Jenkinson, 43, said during a break at work. “Not being able to ever secure year-round housing has made me feel like a failure as a mother.”

Elsewhere on the island, Ashley Barbosa, 26, and her 5-year-old son have been temporarily staying at an overcrowded rental with her husband’s cousins. Now Barbosa is reluctantly preparing to move back to Rhode Island and leave her husband behind; he’ll sleep on his boss’s couch. He works in construction, refurbishing decks for vacationers.

At this point, even those who provide fundamental services have few options.

The new Oak Bluffs fire chief, Nelson Wirtz, doesn’t have a home and is currently staying at his sister’s house on the island. When his wife and children arrive later this summer,

they plan to alternate between his sister's and a camper at the Martha's Vineyard Family Campground while he waits for a place to come through.

Wirtz said that he had considered not taking the job because of the extreme housing shortage.

"Of everything about the job, housing [was] probably one of the biggest issues," he said in an interview at the fire station.



The new Oak Bluffs fire chief, Nelson Wirtz (right), met with firefighters in his new office. Wirtz is without a home. When his wife and children arrive this summer, they plan to alternate between bunking at his sister's house on the island and living in a camper at the Martha's Vineyard Family Campground. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The firefighters in Wirtz's department are paid a small yearly stipend and many also work middle-class day jobs. They struggle to find housing; the EMTs are having difficulty, too. That puts public safety at risk.

"There have to be people here to do this job," Wirtz said.

Faced with the mounting crisis, some residents and elected officials have returned to an

idea that has bubbled up over the years but so far failed to come to fruition.

The [Coalition to Create the Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank](#) seeks to establish a permanent fund to underwrite year-round affordable housing for people at specific income levels. It would work similarly to the [land bank](#), which already conserves land for public use on the island, said Silber, who is coordinating the effort. The bank would not develop or manage land, but instead receive proposals from towns and organizations and choose which should receive money, prioritizing projects on already developed land.

The effort would be funded by a so-called transfer fee, a tax on real estate sales that has been proposed in a number of cities in the past year, [including Boston](#). In this case, that fee would be 2 percent on any sale over \$1 million, and it could be paid by the buyer or the seller, depending on how the legislation develops.

Aspen, Colo., another high-cost, seasonal destination, set up a similar system in the late 1970s, when county officials saw that workers were getting priced out. Partially funded by a 1 percent real estate transfer fee, the Aspen/Pitkin County Housing Authority program has created more than 3,000 affordable units in the city — roughly a third of all the units available. About half are rentals and half are for sale. Tenants have to work in the county to qualify.

“Normal people would not live in Aspen if it were not for this program,” said Diane Foster, Aspen’s assistant city manager and interim director of the program, noting that there remains more demand than supply.

A transfer fee has proved a tough sell in Massachusetts, where the Legislature must approve a home rule petition for one to be enacted. Martha’s Vineyard is part of [a coalition of cities and towns](#) across the state pushing for legislation to approve the fees, but so far the legislation has faced strong opposition from real estate groups. Nantucket, facing its own housing challenges, has tried to get a home rule petition for a transfer fee approved in the past three legislative sessions but has not succeeded.

Back in 2005, the towns of Martha's Vineyard agreed to create a housing bank, but the

Back in 2009, the towns of Martha's Vineyard agreed to create a housing bank, but the state Legislature shot down the proposal after lobbying by the Massachusetts Association of Realtors, according to the [Vineyard Gazette](#). The realtors group says such fees raise rents and create barriers to homeownership.

Nevertheless, the Martha's Vineyard coalition is aiming to bring the housing bank proposal to a vote in each of the six island towns at the 2022 annual meetings, while also advocating for transfer fee legislation at the state level.

In the meantime, some businesses have decided that the only way to keep their doors open is to provide housing themselves.

JB Blau, the owner of the Year Round Restaurant Group, began offering subsidized housing to staff a few years ago. This summer the company will provide below-market housing to about a quarter of employees, who work at restaurants including Sharky's and Copper Wok. The restaurant group purchased some houses when prices were lower and rents others at a loss. Blau said the company "takes it on the chin" because providing housing is now simply another cost of doing business on the island.

But even that expensive effort only puts a dent in the problem. For every 100 applications the restaurant group receives, Blau said, about 75 have to be immediately ruled out, because the applicants don't have any way to live on the island.

"After COVID, we learned we can do more with a lot less," he said. "But there's a breaking point."

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