

It's not a staffing problem, it's a housing crisis

Island business owners worry about housing staff and meeting demands of summer visitors.

By **Abigail Rosen** - May 27, 2022



Jesse Steere III, owner of Island staple Shirley's True Value Hardware is concerned about how the housing crisis will not only affect Island businesses, but the Vineyard as a whole. — Abigail Rosen

Island businesses are feeling the pressure of the upcoming influx of summer visitors. It is around this time of year when Vineyard residents begin to brace themselves for what is expected to be — and always is — a chaotic turnaround from a listless off-season to a frenzied peak season. For many year-rounders, summer on Martha's Vineyard isn't always beach days and window shopping strolls, but a hustle.

This year, with palpable staffing shortages precipitated by the worsening housing crisis, Island businesses are struggling to fill shifts, and some are closing entirely. Business owners, spread thin, are concerned about their ability to meet the demands of seasonal residents and tourists.

Jesse Steere III, well-known owner of Shirley's True Value Hardware in Vineyard Haven, told The Times that over the years, he's seen it all, bearing witness to years of housing market ebbs and flows and increasing development, but never experienced anything like this.

With not enough manpower to stock his shelves or be able to offer some of the services Shirley's once had, Steere is worried about the impact the housing crisis will have on him, and his fellow business owners.

“We used to sell 300 or 400 Weber gas grills; we'd deliver them all over the Island,” he said. “We had to stop doing that. We were doing electronic keys for cars, we had to stop doing that. I just don't have enough people.”

“The whole Island is short [on staff],” he said, adding that the housing crisis “has priced everyone out ... It's sad to see.”

In addition to owning and operating Shirley's, Steere has worked at the Oak Bluffs and Tisbury Fire Departments for 25 and 15 years, respectively, and has family ties on the Vineyard going back as far the 1600s — connected to the Norton family on his mother's side, in addition to a multigenerational claim on his father's side of the family.

Steere said he's not surprised about increasing complaints from impatient patrons citing a longer-than-normal register line. “You're going to find that in a lot of places [this summer],” he said. “I've been here my whole life. It's just such a shame to see working-class people have to [move off Island].”

Steere said over the years there's always been a healthy pool of available workforce, but now, "there's no place for them to live — why would they come here?"

An advocate for maintaining the Island's charm through conservation and preservation efforts, Steere noted that the Vineyard's "grandfathered rules and regulations" concerning its development policies have hindered opportunities to address the housing problem by often denying proposals for multi-unit buildings. Specifically, the Martha's Vineyard Commission, — many times responsible for the approval or denial of building proposals Islandwide — he said, perhaps should "make an exception sometimes."

Steere said that contrary to the mainland, where a staffing shortage can more easily be mitigated by pulling in workers from surrounding towns, the Island's geographical location obviously makes that more difficult.

The Oak Bluffs select board recently had to deny a request to increase operating hours for Circuit Ave. restaurants, with the Police Department citing they simply wouldn't have the manpower to proactively ensure safety in the town with an extended closing time.

Recent emergency responses have been collaborative efforts among departments in different towns, and despite pre-existing mutual aid agreements, which consist of intertown joint response plans, the staffing shortage has seeped into the volunteer-based fire departments. Tisbury Fire Department Deputy Chief Patrick Rolston told The Times that his department is seeing a "huge lack of volunteers." Rolston said that in the past, the department had almost double the manpower it has now. On an increase of town collaboration, he said, "We're lucky that all of the departments on the Island work well together."

Rolston said the department experiences more volunteer staff turnaround "because they can't find a place to live, or stay." Making matters worse, he said, are the enthusiastic volunteers who are trying to get by on one income — "it's hard to volunteer on that one income," he said, in addition to affording unprecedentedly high rental costs. Rolston conveyed that some people move to the Island, and after taking the time to familiarize themselves with the community and decide to volunteer for the fire department, or become an EMT, "and then they can't find housing after that," essentially forcing them to move off-Island. And it's not just Tisbury, he said: "If you want to be blunt, it's the entire Island."

Aquinnah is also dealing with lack of workers — with the town's police department desperately low on staff, raising concerns about being able to hold a palpable presence in the peak of the summer. Other Aquinnah officials have come before the town's select board requesting permission to begin to advertise for much-needed help.

Chris Pantalone, owner of Rocco's Pizza, told The Times that he's recently lost numerous staff solely due to the housing crisis, including members of his own family, who have been paramount in the success of the pizzeria's operations. His brother and his niece — along with her spouse and baby — and two counter workers had no choice but to move off-Island. Pantalone said he's hoping he will be able to staff up, but without housing for his staff, he will be forced to make tough decisions. On the lack of housing for year-rounders, he said emphatically, "It's terrible."

If it weren't for the ubiquitous lack of housing, Pantalone said, "I wouldn't have three ex-employees." To Pantalone, it's obvious how devastatingly widespread the problem is. His upstairs neighbor, said Pantalone, who had been living there "for 22 years, just came downstairs to say goodbye to me, because she can't find housing."

Pantalone said of his communications with numerous other businesses, "We all feel the same, maybe it's just time to sell and go."

Pantalone said the problem has gotten to the point where he's considering having to close one day a week, and in a "worst-case scenario," he said, cutting subs from the menu. Although Rocco's is known for having much loved nonpizza selections, Pantalone said, "If I can't find staff, I can handle just my pizza business."

Vineyard Haven's La Soffitta restaurant announced a full season closure, citing its difficulty with securing enough staff. Outside the restaurant, there is a sign that explains the closing is to "best utilize our resources to meet the demands of our customers"; they made the decision to "focus [their] attention" on sister businesses Waterside Market and Fish MV.

Lack of staff is unquestionably a result of inaccessibility of housing. Precarious housing situations, including the well-known "shuffle," are only half the battle. Rental availability has decreased Island-wide, with more seasonal residents joining the COVID-19-related mass exodus from big cities. Living spaces once housing year-rounders transition to lucrative short-term rentals, leaving the heartbeat of the Island summer — business employees — lacking a place to live.

"[Island employees] need a decent place to live, with a bathroom and a kitchen," Steere said, a sentiment which highlights the unfortunate reality of many year-round Islanders who no longer have the luxury of expecting basic essentials, and in effect, are forced to lower their standards for housing situations.

Although there are some Island businesses that can and do house their employees in workforce housing, it's often not feasible for a mom-and-pop shop owner.

Back in March, even Island Housing Trust — the Island's leading developer of affordable housing — felt the pinch, and reached out to IHT supporters in hopes of securing housing for its own staff.

Steere said he's noticed a stark difference concerning increasing homelessness on the Island, and when a seasonal resident who noticed the same inquired about it to Steere in disbelief, he responded, "Well, it's not like you're inviting them to your house."

With recent crackdowns on building owners' misuse of allotted workforce rentals by way of finding loopholes in agreed-upon housing conditions, Island officials have slowly started to shine the spotlight on the nuances of the housing crisis.

"All the working-class people have pretty much left," Steere said, and the ones that are still here will probably have to leave if they can't find housing. "All the rentals are turning into Airbnbs," he said. "We need good-quality people here." Not only is the Island losing seasonal employees, but hospital workers, school employees, carpenters, electricians, and so many of the Island's talented artists are making the decision to move on.

The reality of the crisis, Steere said, is "something we all need to realize."