

## SOCIAL ISSUES

# In Martha's Vineyard, even the doctors can't afford housing anymore

Essential workers can't afford to stay on the island, putting basic services in jeopardy

By [Marissa J. Lang](#)

September 16, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

MARTHA'S VINEYARD, Mass. — The stacks of chicken broth and shelf-stable milk were dwindling as the food pantry entered the last minutes of the day and a 63-year-old woman in a Boston Red Sox mask hurried through the door.

Sharon Brown, the pantry director, greeted the woman at the front desk. As Brown logged the details she needed to collect into her system, the woman's story unspooled: After 18 years of living on the island, her rent had suddenly shot up.

"I couldn't believe it. Doubled!" the woman said. "I've never seen things this bad."

"This summer was the worst summer ever," Brown agreed.

What Brown didn't say out loud was that she knew this story well. That she and her 14-year-old son had moved three times since June. That in two weeks, when school began, she had no idea where they were going to live. Finding an affordable year-round rental on the Vineyard had become next to impossible.

"Well," Brown began, "if you know anyone who has a year-round..." Her voice trailed off.

The Red Sox fan considered for a moment before shaking her head.

"I don't," she said. "But I'll keep an ear out."

This is the part of Martha's Vineyard most people never see. An island known for its opulence and natural beauty, a playground for presidents and celebrities, it is kept afloat by workers for whom America's housing crisis is not an eventuality. It's here.

Even before Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) this week made a political statement by sending two planes full of asylum seekers to the summer haven, the dearth of affordable housing on the Vineyard had pushed its year-round community to a breaking point.

Schools have struggled to staff classrooms. Indigenous people whose families have lived on the island for centuries

have been forced to leave their homeland. Firefighters and government workers can't afford to stay in the communities they serve. People juggling two, three, even four service-industry jobs say they live each month knowing they are one rent hike away from moving into their cars or tents or onto a friend's couch.

And then there's Brown, who serves the island's neediest, including its growing population of seniors.

This hollowing out is nothing new in cities like Los Angeles, New Orleans and Austin, where short-term rentals and investor home buyers have overtaken razor-thin housing markets and destabilized whole neighborhoods. But on an island where commuting means setting sail over temperamental waters, the Vineyard's housing crisis is also an existential one.

"We're hemorrhaging people who are our infrastructure, who hold this community up," said Laura Silber, the coordinator of the Coalition to Create the Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank, which led a successful effort this year to win support for a new fund for affordable housing. "If you don't have municipal workers, if you don't have teachers, if you don't have emergency workers, if you don't have someone to help families who are struggling and run the food bank, how does a community keep functioning?"

## Nowhere to 'shuffle' to

In the winter, the 96-square-mile landmass of Martha's Vineyard settles into stillness. The tourism industry's grip on rental properties loosens, and the families who live here year-round rotate into more spacious winter homes for around six months. Only about half the island's homes remain occupied all year, according to the [Martha's Vineyard Commission](#).

As the Vineyard thaws, what locals refer to as the "island shuffle" kicks into high gear. They pack up and move from those winter homes into summer rentals, where payments are made by the week and housing can mean anything from a shack with no kitchen or flushable toilet to a camper van or a room in someone else's home. Cars with license plates from places such as New York, New Jersey and D.C. jam the island's two-lane roads. Bars fill with bodies, crowds clog the beaches, and the Vineyard's lone airport becomes the third-busiest in New England.

"Because the island shuffle is so ingrained in the culture of the Vineyard, we didn't recognize it for what it was — housing insecurity — because it was just part of life," Silber said. "Now there's nowhere left to shuffle to."

Brown found a steady winter rental when she moved to the island five years ago. Summers were tougher, she said, but usually she could find someplace to last her and her son, Carron, through the busiest months. Now, they are moving every few weeks — sometimes staying in a house for only a few days.

A similar emergency has hit in resort towns, beach communities and rural destinations around the country, from the [Hamptons](#) to [Aspen, Colo.](#), and [Jackson Hole, Wyo.](#) The more remote the place, the deeper the crisis.

On Martha's Vineyard, policymakers have chronically underinvested in affordable housing and allowed investment properties and short-term rentals to proliferate unchecked. The island, experts said, is more than 10 years late to confront its housing crisis, and it is not moving fast enough to narrow the gap.

Between 2010 and 2019, the amount of housing on the island grew by over 4 percent, according to the Martha's Vineyard Commission. But any progress was eaten up by the vacation-rental market. In the same period, the Commission found, the number of units occupied year-round dropped by more than 8 percent.

The arrival of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020 made things worse. Affluent remote workers flocked to the island's salty air and tree-lined neighborhoods. Some who already owned property moved in full-time, depleting winter-

housing options. Others bought up old homes and new builds, driving the median cost of houses up to \$1.3 million as of April, according to the State House News Service. In the past year, home prices rose 33 percent.

“We can’t build our way out of this,” said Silber, from the housing bank coalition. Instead, the Vineyard, she said, must recapture housing that has been lost to the investment and short-term rental market rather than leaning exclusively on new development on the environmentally fragile island.

Even doctors can hardly afford to live here. Martha’s Vineyard Hospital, the largest employer on the island and home to its only emergency room, has for months been operating with a quarter of its staff jobs left unfilled. In January, CEO Denise Schepici offered 19 jobs to doctors, nurses and other workers ahead of the busy summer months, during which the island’s population swells from roughly 20,000 to 100,000 and emergency calls skyrocket.

Each was turned down.

“How do you recruit when rents are doubling from \$3,000 a month to \$6,000 a month, which is what happened to one of my nurses living in a one-bedroom apartment?” Schepici said.

None of the changes advocates have called for — zoning laws altered to protect year-round housing stock, long-term funding streams for affordable development and short-term-rental regulation — have been enacted island-wide. Earlier this year, the Vineyard’s six towns voted to approve a housing bank, a place to store money collected off of large real estate deals that would fund affordable housing. But the island can’t create such a fund until the state moves to give local municipalities the authority to impose real-estate transfer fees.

“How do you recruit when rents are doubling from \$3,000 a month to \$6,000 a month?”

— Denise Schepici, CEO of Martha's Vineyard Hospital

Last session, the legislature failed to pass a measure to do so. But state lawmakers have vowed to push one through this year.

“We’re surrounded by water. There aren’t a lot of options for expanding outward,” said Jim Feiner, a real estate broker and chairman of the housing committee in the town of Chilmark who advocated for the adoption of the housing bank. “We need to start being proactive instead of reactive if we want our community to survive.”

## Employers step in

To keep the lights on, many businesses on the Vineyard have been forced to confront the housing crisis directly.

“We’ve had to get creative,” Schepici said.

For the hospital, that has meant leasing about two dozen dormitory-style bedrooms at a cost of about \$3 million a year to offer subsidized housing for workers. Much more, though, is needed. The hospital is in the process of purchasing property in Edgartown with room enough to house nearly 50 workers and their families, but it will be more than two years before anyone can move in.

“You know, I didn’t come here to build real estate,” Shepici said. “I came here to run the hospital.” Schepici said. But for a wide range of businesses on the island, the choice is stark: House workers, or there won’t be any left.

Island native Jeremiah Roberts, 28, lives in a loft owned by his employer, Larkin Stallings, who provides housing to several year-round workers at the Ritz, a dive in downtown Oak Bluffs.

Roberts, who has been working since he graduated from high school, juggles a side hustle and a fledgling music career with two full-time jobs running his own landscaping company and manning the bar at the Ritz. He works days and nights, he said, so he can stay on the island to help his aging mother. He wants to avoid the fate that has befallen so many of his peers: Those who left rarely returned. Those who stayed have struggled to move out of their parents' homes and make a life of their own.

The loft costs him \$1,400 a month, a nearly extinct price point during the high season, when rent can go for more than that per week.

While the arrangement helps sustain Stallings's business, he acknowledged that the setup creates a power imbalance.

"If [Roberts] leaves the job, he loses his apartment. He doesn't have the freedom to move around," said Stallings, who also serves as the vice president of the Martha's Vineyard Community Services board. "Even though I offer it, I really don't think this employer-based housing is a good solution."

## Moving every few weeks

When Brown was recruited to work as a chef at a hotel on the Vineyard, she was also told the job came with a place to live. But she quickly realized the accommodations wouldn't work for her and her then-10-year-old son.

"I was in there with these kids, 20-somethings, who were smoking and drinking and staying up until 2 a.m.," Brown said. "I had to start looking for something else."

Brown and Carron, now 14, have not lived in one place for more than 11 months. Asked how many times they have moved since arriving on the Vineyard, Carron needed two hands to count.

"After a while, the moving starts to get annoying," he said recently, as he prepared to depart yet another house, bags lumpy with clothes at his feet. "But you get used to it."

In her lowest moments, Brown thinks about boarding the ferry to the mainland and never looking back. She tried it once, after losing her kitchen job during the pandemic. She and Carron felt miserable.

"After being on the island for three years and not hearing people shooting, not hearing police cars every day, when we went back to that, it was a nightmare," she said.

Last year, Brown was asked to return to run the island's food bank, combining her experience in kitchens and as a social worker in Delaware. Seeing it as divine intervention, she said yes.

The pantry serves roughly 2,000 people a month, many of them seniors, low-wage workers, immigrants and families with children. More than a third of the Vineyard's full-time residents are 65 years or older, according to Martha's Vineyard Community Services, well above the national average of one in six.

Brown sees her work as a calling. She shows up even on her days off, puts in produce orders from home while her son watches TV, and answers work calls well after dark. One elderly woman, a longtime client, calls Brown each night to pray together before bed.

On Brown's weekly food deliveries, she has fed people living in tents in the state forest and in cars parked overnight in beachside lots. One senior client, Brown said, spends her summer months living in a chicken coop out back so she can rent out the main house and "make what she needs to tide her over for the rest of the year," Brown said.

Yet Brown still sees the island as a sanctuary, a place where her son can run around with friends or bike on his own to the beach. A place where she doesn't have to worry as much about the terrible things that happen to Black boys in America — street violence, state violence or worse. Here, her son is free to be who he is: a soft-spoken ninth-grader who helps seniors with their groceries and volunteers at the food bank after school, who loves video games and rolls his eyes when his mom tells him to stop watching YouTube videos with so much swearing, then quietly complies.

"I ask him every time we're about to move again: Are you sure you want to stay here?" Brown said. "And he says yes."

By the second week of August, it was time to move again. Brown had been subletting a small Victorian cottage at the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association in Oak Bluffs for a month and a half, the maximum allowed by the community's board of directors. When she asked for an extension, the board said no.

Despite posting pleas on social media, putting her name on affordable-housing wait lists, and exhausting her network of friends, colleagues and even clients at the food bank, Brown's only housing option was to accept a weeklong plant-sitting gig at a friend's house. The week after, she planned to take Carron on a 10-day road trip. It was more than a vacation. It was a way to buy time: If they stayed, they might have nowhere to live.

As Brown planned their journey — a stop to visit family in Maryland, their trip to Universal Studios — their return date ricocheted in her mind.

"I have to pray that something will be ready by then," she said.

## Saved by an act of charity

The limited supply of available housing has pit islanders against islanders, individuals against businesses.

In the spring, Lori DiGiacomo, 61, discovered her landlord was putting his Vineyard Haven house and the detached in-law unit where she had lived for six years on the market. A company that intends to turn it into workforce housing scooped it up for more than \$1.5 million.

"The first thought that went through my head was, 'I'm going to lose my housing,'" said DiGiacomo, a kindergarten teacher who has taught the Vineyard's children for nearly 20 years. "Then I realized: I'm going to lose my people; I'm going to lose my tribe; I'm going to lose my sense of place."

Vineyard Haven was where she raised her child and built a life, working as a house cleaner, artisan and waitress on top of her teaching job. It was where she fed the neighborhood cats, where she imagined herself being as she aged, where she planned to retire and welcome her adult daughter home for the holidays.

**"I'm going to lose my people;  
I'm going to lose my tribe;  
I'm going to lose my sense of  
place."** Instead, DiGiacomo began to apply for teaching licenses in other states. She took to Google, sending a query into the ether: "Where to move at 60?" But then, she said, her school's principal reminded her that if she can hold on for five more years, her pension payout would increase by around 75 percent.

— Lori DiGiacomo, 61, longtime teacher

"I wasn't really thinking practically until I sat down and did the math," she said.

After DiGiacomo was featured in a [June Martha's Vineyard Times story](#) on the island's attrition of teachers, a concerned reader offered her a one-year lease on the 300-square-foot basement apartment attached to her house.

"The only reason I have housing right now is because of the charity of one person, as opposed to a system that's

actually working,” DiGiacomo said.

DiGiacomo spent the final weeks of summer shedding pieces of her life. She rehomed her cat, gave away her dining room table, sold her Tiffany-style lamp and a framed photo of chickens. All the while, she recited a George Carlin-inspired mantra — “It’s just stuff” — between steadying breaths.

“This is where I want to be. This is my home,” said DiGiacomo, whose lease expires next summer. “Hopefully, God willing, I might just be able to stay.”

## A prayer and a reprieve

Brown was in Florida when her landlord called with news. The Camp Meeting Association had approved the appeal for a six-week extension.

Brown was awash with relief. This meant she and Carron could move back to the Oak Bluffs cottage and ride out the end of the season. It meant a steady place to live — until October.

As she and Carron loaded the car once more with clothes stuffed in trash bags and her set of purple suitcases filled to the zippers, she repeated a promise he had heard before. One Brown isn’t sure she can keep.

“Don’t worry, baby,” she said. “We’ll find a year-round soon.”

*Story editing by Annys Shin. Photo editing by Mark Miller. Copy editing by Paola Ruano. Design by J.C. Reed.*