




Housing Rural Oregon

Life on the edge of Oregon



Elias and Farrah Hanna look out the door of their home in Ontario, with baby Steve in the foreground.

PHOTO BY CELESTE NOCHE

One family's struggle to navigate the bureaucracy of survival

BY EMILLY PRADO
STAFF WRITER

It's the first of the month, rent is due, and Sarmad Elias' government benefits haven't been deposited yet – another instance of paperwork gone wrong, he said. Seror Abdullah, Elias' wife, bounces their baby in a donut-shaped pillow while their older sons, Elias, 11, and Farrah, 9, watch TV. The air conditioning hasn't worked since they moved in, so the fans in the house is blowing profusely and the front door is propped open to let in any air that might help cool them down on this 101-degree day. Elias crouches, then points to a boarded-up hole underneath his kitchen sink: "The mice come through there."

The Elias family moved to Ontario from El Cajon near San Diego, Calif., after struggling to make ends meet in the metropolitan area. Before California, they lived in a Turkish refugee camp for more than two years after fleeing religious persecution under ISIS in their hometown of Mosul, Iraq.

While still in El Cajon, Elias' brother-in-law, Melad Jarjees, told him about the short Section 8 wait list and lower cost of living to be found in

Eastern Oregon, so Elias and family packed up their belongings, and migrated once more. Once in Ontario, they found their dollars could stretch a little longer and the job application process was more accessible. But after moving into their second home in the area, they discovered the apartment was already inhabited by rodents.

"He paid a deposit of \$850 here. The rent is \$650 per month.

(After) he signed the lease, he (found the) mice, but when he signed, they (didn't) tell them they had mice," explained Jarjees, who works a second job as a translator through the recently opened Four Rivers Welcome Center for refugees. "He called the manager and said, 'I bought everything. Can you just fix the hole?'" She reportedly agreed but hadn't followed through with the agreement when we spoke 10 days after the phone call. Instead of waiting, Elias ended up fixing the hole himself fearing that his six-month-old son, Steve, might eat the droppings.



About this series

This article is part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series. Street Roots received funding from Meyer Memorial Trust's Affordable Housing Initiative to develop dedicated reporting on rural housing issues. Read more articles from the series at news.streetroots.org/ruralhousing

Seeking Section 8

Over the past year or so, Ontario has experienced a rising influx of refugees, largely as a result of spreading awareness about the lower-than-usual wait time for the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program. While most metropolitan areas can have wait times exceeding three years, the wait for housing assistance in Ontario was only three months. But in May, the Housing Authority of Malheur and Harney Counties announced it had closed the wait list due to a budget shortfall. The Four Rivers Cultural Center – partly for its name and because of the lack of proactive government outreach – organically became a site

ONTARIO

Living in poverty: 38 percent

MALHEUR COUNTY

Living in poverty: 25 percent

Renters paying more than half their income in rent: 1 out of 3

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