

Renter woes: ‘People are not living even paycheck to paycheck’

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grows through the spring and summer and begins to decline in September and October. It bottoms out in January and February before swelling once again ahead of the tourist season, said Shawna Sykes, a workforce analyst with the Oregon Employment Department.

This year, a January employment low of 18,430 jobs barely budged upward in March and then plummeted sharply to an estimated 14,030 in April — a loss of more than 4,000 jobs, most in the accommodations and food service sectors.

Jobs crept back through the summer but never exceeded January’s numbers before dropping again by several hundred jobs in September.

“So it appears the traditional winter decline is starting,” Sykes said, adding, “Nearly every industry in Clatsop County has less jobs this September than it did last September.”

The good news is that many of the clients who received CARES Act rental assistance through Clatsop Community Action and needed work found work, according to Susan Prettyman, the agency’s social services program manager. Some no longer need help making rent.

The agency provides other services and resources that Prettyman believes will keep people on a stable path going forward. However, it isn’t clear what winter will bring.

Sykes and people who promote tourism on the coast

point to a pent-up demand for travel and recreation. Visitors still flocked to the coast late into October as mellow, sunny weather persisted.

“I think the recovery depends a lot on our situation with COVID,” Sykes said, “and the ability of people to return to their normal work situations and the ability for people outside the area to travel to Clatsop County with no restrictions again.”

Still, she added, challenges remain.

“The situation with people with children in school at home is inhibiting parents’ ability to get back to their normal work situations,” she said. “With 1 in 4 of the county’s jobs in the leisure and hospitality sector, many of those jobs are not jobs that can be performed at home.”

Child care gap

Karen Gonzalez, a single mother who lives in Seaside, is one of the people relying on rental assistance through Clatsop Community Action.

Gonzalez worked for the Hallmark Resort & Spa in Cannon Beach — a wonderful place, she said, but there was no help with child care. The job required flexibility that Gonzalez struggled to accommodate with a 5-year-old at home.

The lack of consistent, affordable child care was becoming too difficult to manage and she had just put in her two-week notice when coronavirus closures and restrictions hit. She applied for a number of benefits, including unemployment, and kept getting denied.

Gonzalez was born in the United States but her family



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian
Arthur Clark Jr. owns rental properties in Astoria and is managing tenants who are struggling to make rent.

came here from Mexico. She considered sending her child to live with her grandparents in Mexico so she could stay and work.

With the rental assistance, she can remain in Seaside with her child. She found a part-time job with a construction company. She reads emails and handles invoices — work she can do from home. It does not cover all of her bills and living expenses, however. She goes to the food bank and dips into her savings to get by.

“I guess I shouldn’t really complain because I got some help, but it’s not enough,” she said. “It’s not enough for life.”

Clatsop Community Action also works closely with landlords and has heard from some who are seeking assistance of their own this year. When tenants fall behind on their rent, Prettyman has found that many local landlords want to do what they can to help. They partner with the agency to find resources for tenants.

But, she said, “many feel

the pressure of mounting mortgages.”

Gov. Kate Brown issued a moratorium on evictions in late March, an order that will continue through the end of the year. While it protects renters who may be struggling financially due to the pandemic, it puts landlords in a bind, said Rick Newton, who represents the Clatsop County Rental Owners Association and is also a Warrenton city commissioner.

“A tenant doesn’t have to prove that anything is haywire to stop paying rent,” he said.

That leaves landlords with nothing to show the banks if they are having a hard time making payments on their mortgage, he said.

For the many people who legitimately can’t pay rent because of coronavirus impacts, there are others who seem to be gaming the system.

Arthur Clark Jr., an electrician based in Astoria, owns two rental properties that he has operated for only a couple of years, his first foray

into being a landlord. He thought it might be a good retirement plan, but he has hit a wall with the tenants of one home.

He says the couple stopped paying rent consistently last year. He planned to evict them but held off for the winter at their request. He did not file a motion for eviction until March 16. Gov. Brown issued a moratorium on evictions the following week.

Since then, Clark has shouldered the cost of the mortgage, home insurance, taxes and other expenses — costs he had not anticipated, expecting to collect income through rent payments. He says the renters have not allowed him access to the property and maintenance needs are piling up. His court date has been set over several times.

“And I can’t figure out how the state can stop an eviction process due to COVID when this was before it all,” he wrote in a letter to the court in September.

By the time he goes to court for a hearing in early January, Clark estimates his tenants will owe him \$18,500. Even if he succeeds in evicting them, he doesn’t expect he will see much, if any, of the money back.

“I don’t think it’s up to the landlord to carry that burden,” Clark said. “I get it. It’s tough times. But that just compounds the problem.”

It is a different story with the tenants of the triplex he owns. Clark has been able to work with tenants there when they faced issues making rent.

“As long as they communicate, it’s fine,” he said.

Compounding stresses

The pandemic compounded stresses that have long existed for North Coast renters, Matthews and Prettyman say. There is a lack of child care — much less, affordable child care — and few affordable or workforce housing options coupled with rising rents. All are factors that keep people on the edge or force them over it when tough times worsen.

As Clatsop Community Action processed the influx of new applicants this year, Matthews and Prettyman were shocked to see how much of people’s incomes went to pay rent.

They had grown used to seeing the cost of rent account for 60% to 65% of a person’s income. Now they’re seeing it account for over 80% of some people’s income.

That is alarming, Matthews said.

“People are not living even paycheck to paycheck,” she said. “There are people who may not be able to make it without any type of assistance.”

She and Prettyman were not surprised to find many people needed help when their usual income was disrupted even slightly because of the pandemic.

“I think one of the things to remember is the people who are applying are still our neighbors,” Prettyman said. “There’s a stigma there that people who are applying are ‘less than’ and that’s really not the case.”

“It’s our friends and our family and people in the community we know.”

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