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Residents struggle with skyrocketing rents in Chester County

Between October 2019 and September 2021, rental costs rose by 15 percent in Coatesville



Donna Rovins — Digital First Media

Chester County Commissioners' Chairwoman Michelle Kichline at a ceremony several years ago for SteelTown Village – an affordable housing rental development that was constructed in Phoenixville. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

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KENNETT SQUARE — A good life isn't cheap.

A multi-millionaire in Landenberg recently said that money cannot buy happiness, love or time.

Concurrently, cash is key to covering the costs of food, shelter and even water.



"There is no question that rent has gone up substantially," said Dale Gravett, executive director of the Chester County Housing Authority.

In the City of Coatesville, rent increased by 15 percent during the last two years, according to Gravett. This increase specifically occurred between October 2019 to September 2022 and the data was released to the county via the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, the Chester County Housing Authority has paid out in rental assistance more than \$3 million since March 2020. Four other organizations in the county are also distributing funds.

Four regional organizations along with Chester County Housing Authority have distributed close to \$18 million for rental assistance since March 2020, Gravett said.

"There is no doubt that rents are increasing very fast in Chester County and that has made it more difficult for our housing agency to place clients, with limited incomes, into affordable housing," Gravett said. "Such rent increases are happening nationwide."

He said that HUD has realized this and now has permitted public housing agencies to provide increased monetary assistance to families who have received vouchers and are searching for decent rental housing.

"Chester County residents can apply for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) by calling the 211 system," Gravett said. "They can potentially receive up to 15 months of rent that is in arrears and also receive utility assistance."

In Chester County, callers will be referred to one of the following agencies: Housing Authority of Chester County; Friends Association; Open Hearth, Inc; Human Services, Inc. and Oxford Neighborhood Services Center.

Inflation rises

Nationwide, inflation rose by 7 percent in December 2021 compared to December 2020, said Regional Economist Karl Kever of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics on Thursday.

For the Greater Philadelphia Region, the 2019 inflation rate was 2 percent, he said. Inflation then rose by 4 percent in 2021. This represents the largest inflation increase since 2004.

Across America last year, inflation rose by a national average of 4.7 percent.

"We haven't seen such large jumps in a while," Kever said.

One of the greatest challenges facing people locally is the gentrification of a lot of low-income housing, according to Carrie Freeman, executive director at United Way of Southern Chester County, on Thursday.

"The loss of low-income housing has been a huge problem for us," said Freeman, per gentrification in Chester County.

Freeman said there are local efforts, in Kennett Square, to request that builders, when constructing new townhouses, set the rent at a lower price for a few of the apartments to help overcome the high cost of rent for some working-class families in the area who often live paycheck-to-paycheck.

For some living paycheck to paycheck, the rising rent costs mean a tough decision for some: To pay the rent, or buy food.

"It is expensive to live here," she said. Yet, "renters are paying more than mortgage holders."

When gentrification happens, longtime residents, who are renters, are forced to move elsewhere to find affordable housing, such as southward to Cecil County, Maryland or the rural communities near Oxford and westward to Lancaster County.

"We have to provide acceptable housing for people of all income types," Freeman said.

Chester County is home to 534,413 people as of July 2021, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Currently, the typical rent in Wayne is \$2,080 per month, according to a recent report in Stacker, which is 28.1 percent above the typical rent in the Philadelphia metro. The typical monthly rent in West Chester is listed at \$1,795, or 10.5 percent above the rate in Philadelphia.



There are 79 individuals and families presently enrolled in emergency assistance services with Kennett Area Community Service, said Amy Scheuren, program director, on Thursday. There are also 40 households on a waiting list.

Due to the rising cost of rental fees, "Folks are moving out of the area, quite honestly," Scheuren said.

She encouraged people who are in need of rental assistance and utility bill help to call 211.

"There is funding," Scheuren said regarding the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, which she said has kept many people in their homes.

Last year, Kennett Area Community Service served nearly 550 families and individuals with food and emergency rental assistance in Chester County.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Consumer Price Index for energy increased by 30 percent between December 2020 and December 2021. During this same time period, the general increase was 7 percent for all items whereas food costs increased by 6.3 percent.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 5.2 percent of the population in Chester County is living in poverty. The median household income in 2019 for Chester County was \$100,214.

In Chester County, 75 percent of the 203,159 housing units here are owner-occupied properties, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The median gross rent between 2015 and 2019 was \$1,330.

The Washington Post recently reported that rental costs are up by as much as 40 percent in some cities across America. Across the Delaware River in the Garden State, rent is up by 34.5 percent in New Brunswick, home to Rutgers University.

Rental units in Chester County that were listed on BrightMLS increased by 8.8 percent with the average price of \$1,971 per month in 2020 increasing to \$2,145 per month in 2021.

In Wayne, rental costs have increased by 13.4 percent over the last five years, according to Stacker. The typical rental cost in Wayne averages at \$2,080 per month.

The average rent in West Chester is \$1,758 for an average space of 887 square feet, according to RentCafe.

"Affordable homes in Chester County — be they rentals or purchased properties — can be hard to come by," said Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell. "It is a county priority, and a focus of many of our urban communities, to generate a mix of housing options that can be accessible to everyone, including our nurses, police, manufacturing and service workers."

Maxwell said there are more affordable housing developments in the works than ever before, in places like West Chester, Kennett Square, Coatesville and Phoenixville.

"In the meantime, we are able to continue support for individuals and families who are in need of immediate rent and utility assistance."

Maxwell said the Emergency Rental Assistance Program has helped more than 2,200 households in Chester County since its inception 23 months ago.

"Of the 193,234 occupied housing units in Chester County, it is estimated that there are 49,570 renter-occupied units," said Dolores Colligan, acting director of the Chester County Department of Community Development, citing 2019 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Chester County Commissioners continue to invest in affordable housing developments, Colligan said on Thursday.

Pinckney Hill Commons, developed by Church Housing Corp., will provide 51 affordable general occupancy rental units in the Borough of West Chester, she said.

Red Clay Manor, developed by Delaware Valley Development Company, will provide 60 affordable senior rental units in the Borough of Kennett Square, she added.

"Both developments," Colligan said, "are expected to be completed this spring."





Jen Samuel is a writer with experience in journalism beginning as a beat reporter for the Avon Grove Sun in 2006. Press awards won include investigative and First Amendment reporting. An out-of-the-box thinker who helps people and communities with a compassionate heart, while taking a break from journalism in 2014, Jen worked with lawmakers in New Jersey to enact laws for the protection of endangered species including to protect elephants from extinction through the abolishment of ivory sales. Jen began working at the Daily Local News as a reporter on January 20, 2020.

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