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Every night before bed, Albert Strickland hangs a sheet to divide the motel room he lives in with his wife and daughter at the Cloud Springs Lodge in Ringgold, Ga.

It's only a gesture, but it's the best he can do to give his 13-year-old daughter, Ashley, a measure of privacy in the one-room efficiency the family calls home.

Victims of the national affordable housing shortage, the Stricklands are among the families in the Chattanooga area living in extended-stay motels, paying by the week for an efficiency kitchen, a roof over their heads and a little peace of mind.

Though basic, the Stricklands' room is tidy and warm and smells like an apple cinnamon candle. Nala, a 4-month-old black kitten, playfully scampers on the laminate flooring. A family portrait hangs on the wall.

"I know that America has the richest poor people in the world and they do ... but you see where I'm at," said Mr. Strickland, 35, who makes \$20,000 as a salesman for Builder's Hardware. "Don't get me wrong. I smile every morning. I wake up, I'm out of the cold, I'm warm, we're fed and that says a lot for itself, but come on."

Around Chattanooga, there are about 25 motels offering the extended-stay option, including Lookout Mountain Suites, Hamilton Inn, InTown Suites and Superior Creek Lodge.

While the number of motels renting by the week seems to have remained about the same over the past decade, lengthy stays appear to be on the rise, according to data from the Hamilton County auditor's office.

From September 1998 to August 2008, sales tax deductions for motel stays longer than 90 days doubled from about \$214,000 to \$419,000, according to the auditor's office.

"This is the new SRO (single room occupancy)," said Sheila Crowley, president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition a Washington, D.C.-based research and advocacy group.

"For many years in cities what we had were old hotels that had become somewhat seedy, and they became what people called 'flop houses,' where you could rent a room for a relatively small amount of money each month," she said. "I do think the motels have taken over as the dominant form of that kind of housing at this point."

Unlike the more expensive extended stay facilities that cater to business travelers, Colman Hochman, owner of the Cloud Springs Lodge, said economy motels like his tend to attract people who once rented in the area.

“In the high-end extended stays you’re likely to have less than 20 percent local traffic,” he said. “Somewhere in the realm of 80 to 90 percent of our residents have lived or formerly lived within 10 miles of our establishment.”

Those who live in extended stay motels aren’t homeless or unemployed or exclusively reliant on government assistance. They are waitresses, carpenters, factory workers, truck drivers, housekeepers, retail clerks and roofers and there simply isn’t enough affordable housing to go around.

“It’s like we don’t exist,” Mr. Strickland said. “It’s like ‘We’ll forget about these people. We’ll forget about this side,’ ” he said. “And it’s what it makes you feel like. ... If you make \$25,000 or under, this is what you get.”

Poor can’t afford fair market rent

While experts point out that the affordable housing shortage is nothing new, the level of need has reached crisis proportions over the past decade. Fueling this need are drastic cuts in federal funding for public housing authorities, rising housing costs in the private market and falling wages, as skilled industry jobs have been replaced by growth in the service sector.

The result, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, is that for the 9 million extremely low-income households in the United States, there are only 6.2 million units of housing that are affordable to them.

In Hamilton County, the Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$639, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, more than double the amount affordable to a minimum wage worker earning \$6.55 an hour. Almost half (45 percent) of renters in Hamilton County, the National Low Income Housing Coalition found, are unable to afford rent for a two-bedroom apartment.

The dynamics of the rental market leave the poor with few choices.

Robert Neal, 43, who moved into Superior Creek Lodge last September after separating from his wife, said many of his neighbors at the motel are barely surviving.

“It’s either live here or else fold up and maybe live over at one of the homeless shelters,” he said. “Everybody’s constantly running around worried, ‘Am I going to be able to pay my rent this week? Am I going to be out on the street?’ So this is basically a halfway house. Halfway between becoming homeless and having a home.”

East Ridge Mayor Mike Steele said the situation for the people at Superior Creek is dire.

“Basically what you’ve got is a housing project at the interchange in East Ridge. And what I’m defining as a housing project is low-income housing for a segment of our population that desperately needs it,” he said. “Yet at the same time they have no protection, no amenities that they might get in subsidized housing. ... I hate it. I hate it for the people.”

Superior Creek’s owner David Gysin, while acknowledging that his motel tends to serve those who have nowhere else to go, said he offers a nice room at a reasonable price.

“We provide something for a certain niche of society, and we try to do it well,” he said. “Probably the next step for some of these people is being homeless.”

4,200 on waiting list for housing voucher

Part of the problem is that traditional low-income housing options such as public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher program (formerly Section 8) are increasingly difficult to access, according to Bill Lord, chief information officer for the Chattanooga Housing Authority.

With 4,200 people on the waiting list for a housing choice voucher in Chattanooga, Mr. Lord said, the agency has stopped accepting new applicants. Those in line likely will wait another year or more before a unit becomes available.

“There’s not adequate subsidized housing available in Chattanooga or anywhere in the country to accommodate the need,” he said.

The demolition of public housing projects across the country also has limited the supply of low-income housing in many cities, including Chattanooga.

Between 1999, when the first Spencer J. McCallie Homes building came down, to 2005 when the Harriet Tubman, Johnson and Poss homes were razed, CHA lost 875 units of public housing. The 332 units that replaced them in mixed-income communities offer better housing, but still resulted in a net loss of 543 units of housing for low-income families overall, Mr. Lord said.

Pressure on the rental market has been further exacerbated by the recent housing boom, which drove up housing costs and increased the overall housing supply, but not on the affordable end, according to Susan Popkin, principal research associate for the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.

The subsequent bust also has put a tighter squeeze on affordability, as people who formerly owned their homes return to the rental market in the face of rising foreclosures.

Another option for low-income families is to double up with family members, but that can lead to conflict. Mr. Neal chose the motel over relatives to maintain a level of independence while he establishes a roofing business in Chattanooga.

“It’s temporary for me, but for a lot of these people, maybe it’s not,” he said. “A lot of these people they get caught up in the quagmire over here and just feeling like they’re trapped...a lot of these people might wind up here indefinitely.”

“At least we have a home”

One of the largest extended stay motels in Hamilton County is Superior Creek Lodge, which advertises “Best Rates” from a tall sign visible from I-75 South.

The four buildings off Exit 1 on Mack Smith Road are home to more than 600 people, who pay between \$128 and \$188 per week for one or two rooms, including an efficiency kitchen — microwave, hot plate and refrigerator — electricity, heat, cable TV, Internet and in the summertime, a pool.

The pay-by-the-week option attracts people for many reasons, including divorce, unemployment and illness. Others may be ineligible to rent an apartment due to poor credit, criminal backgrounds or spotty rental histories.

More commonly, people don’t have enough money saved to pay the security and utility deposits to secure an apartment.

“You can’t come up with enough money to rent a house because you’re looking at, it may be \$1,000, \$1,500, just to get into a house,” Mr. Neal said. “And then if you’ve got any kind of credit problems or something like that, it’s about impossible to get one.”

For twin sisters Lori Wilson and Becky Dunn, both 28, Superior Creek has given them a little wiggle room in their budgets during these tough economic times.

Ms. Wilson’s husband is a painter, whose income has dwindled due to the downturn in the housing market; Ms. Dunn’s husband is a trucker, who went from making \$1,200 a week to barely bringing in \$500 in the course of a couple of months last spring. In August the family gave up their rental house in East Brainerd and moved into Superior Creek Lodge.

“I really enjoy living here,” Ms. Wilson said.

“It’s easier because it’s all in one bill now,” her sister explained. “Here I can have cable and it’s great, and I don’t need to worry about getting shut off. I love that.”

Living right down the hall from each other, the sisters pop in and out of each other’s rooms constantly. They also have the luxury of more space in which to help Ms. Wilson’s

two daughters — Shelby, 10, and Kara, 9, — with their homework, or to scrapbook and watch television.

Potted plants, deck furniture and a “Welcome” sign on the balcony outside the Dunn’s second-floor suite gives their room the outward appearance of home. Ms. Dunn, who has lived in the motel since July 2007, said living there is a mixed blessing.

“A lot of people look down on you for living in this place, but what they don’t understand is a lot of us didn’t have a choice when we ended up here,” she said. “Our circumstances put us here and you deal with what you’ve got in order to make your family and your life work. At least we’re here and not sleeping behind a store, or something, at night. At least we have a home.”

“And a roof over our heads,” Ms. Wilson added.

“Right,” Ms. Dunn agreed. “At least we have that.”