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# Americans swap homes for hotels as recession bites

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By [Jason Szep](#)

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts (Reuters) - Some Americans are swapping homes for motels as the ranks of the homeless swell during the recession, crowding out shelters and forcing cities and states across the country to find new types of housing.

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In Massachusetts, a record number of families are being put up in motels due to high unemployment and the rising number of homes going into foreclosure, costing

taxpayers \$2 million per month but providing a lifeline for desperate families.

"I feel like this has saved my life," said Tarya Seagraves-Quee, a 37-year-old former nurse.

Seagraves-Quee has lived in a cramped one-bedroom suite in a hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with three of her four children for nearly two months. "I'm managing the best way possible. I've learned to make things in the microwave oven."

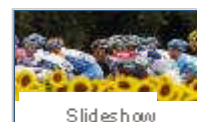
In Massachusetts, homeless shelters are at capacity. State law requires temporary accommodation for those without shelter, leading authorities to place 830 families, including 1,125 children, in 39 motels -- an unprecedented number.

"This truly is the highest we have ever seen it," said Nancy Paladino, director of the family team for the Boston Health Care for the Homeless.

Other cities are noticing a similar trend. In Indianapolis, Indiana, overcrowded homeless shelters are turning families away, forcing growing numbers to seek vouchers for hotels provided by nonprofit groups such as United Way.

"Anecdotally, it's increased," said Michael Hurst, director of the Coalition for Homeless Intervention and Prevention Indianapolis. The advocacy

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group started to compile statistics on the number of homeless families living in hotels this year after noticing signs of an increase.

"The hotel owners will tell you it has increased. The homeless service providers and the school officials will say we know there are more people living in hotels and putting their kids in school because that is the address they are giving us."

#### 'JUST A STEPPING STONE'

In the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, the large Wilson family turned to a budget motel as a weeklong transition between a homeless shelter and an apartment.

"Each step we're going it's just a stepping stone," said 42-year-old Frederick Wilson as he sat with his wife, Annette, in a one-bedroom suite they share with four of the six children in their care, including a grandchild.

Called by God, they said, to move from Minnesota to Texas, the family has rapidly made a shift from homeless status to paid employment. Annette has just landed a job as a bus driver, while Frederick said he will work in an office that offers clerical support to Medicaid patients.

They spent two-and-a-half weeks in a homeless shelter in Dallas and were preparing to move into an apartment from the motel. The Urban League, an organization that helps struggling African Americans, is paying the \$204 cost of their suite, which does not include sheets, pillows or toilet paper.

In Phoenix, demand for emergency accommodation is swamping available services as the recession and spiraling foreclosures turn even more families out of their homes.

One nonprofit bought two former hotels -- a Days Inn and a Super 8 -- in a gritty downtown neighborhood to provide emergency accommodation for homeless and low income families. When the \$23 million project is finished in September, it will be able to house 156 families, up from 112 now.

"We've seen a whole new subset of homeless families due to job loss and foreclosures, and our waiting list has doubled in the past year," said Nichole Barnes, chief fund development officer of the UMOM New Day Centers.

"Some were previous homeowners. Due to the housing market out here, they'd got into a mortgage with a flexible interest rate. Some were working full time, but lost their jobs, went through their savings trying to save their home, and then found themselves without a home due to foreclosure," she said.

#### FORECLOSURES AND FAMILIES

In many cities, foreclosures are a big part of a spike in homeless and rise in families living in hotels or motels.

Nearly 80 percent of homeless services providers and advocacy agencies say at least some clients became homeless as a result of a foreclosure, according to a joint report by four of the largest U.S. homeless advocacy groups.

Staying with family or friends and in emergency shelters were the most common post-foreclosure living conditions, followed by hotels or motels, according to the June report.

"In many areas shelters are now completely full, so the only option to keep their families together is to rent a motel room for \$200 a week. That's pretty standard for many who lost their homes to foreclosure," said Michael Stoops, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Unlike Massachusetts, most states do not pick up the tab. "People are spending 80 percent of their total income on hotels," he said. "And food costs are higher because they can't cook."

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, Seagraves-Quee found refuge at a budget hotel after losing her job in Georgia more than a year ago and going without health care for 10 months. She suffers from multiple sclerosis, anemia and lupus, and was recently found to have two cancer spots on her breast. Two of her children, aged 16 and 6, are autistic.

She spent \$700 -- almost all her savings -- on plane tickets to Boston, where she had relatives. Soon the family was in a shelter.

Local authorities later moved her to the hotel and Seagraves-Quee was given medical treatment as part of a program carried out by Boston Health Care for the Homeless.

"Right now, I am picking up from where I left off in Georgia 10 months ago. When I got here I was in really bad health," she said. "I've heard some people say 'Oh that is a ghetto shelter.' But to me it's a wonderful place."

(Additional reporting by Ed Stoddard in Dallas and Tim Gaynor in Phoenix; Editing by Doina Chiacu)

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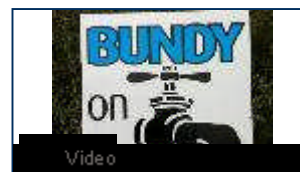
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