

Socially Inclusive Housing

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Our Wisconsin workforce continues to set records. Numbers from June 2024 show a record 3,048,600 people employed in our state with a Labor Force Participation rate of 65.5%, 3% above the national average.

As I have written before, I wish someone would show me all the people who supposedly are sitting on the sidelines somehow mooching off the system or off their parents, unwilling to work. I do not think it is a very large group of employable people.

What I do see are many hardworking people in lower wage jobs making less than they need to survive in 2024. Our Upward Mobility Signals Team at Envision is trying to identify strategies that will address that deficiency. We have identified housing and childcare as two significant factors.

To better understand the situation, here are some more numbers. United Way Wisconsin released its annual Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed (ALICE) report showing that a single individual "Survival Budget" is \$24,492, while a family of four requires \$63,324 just to meet basic needs. A recent report from Voronoi shows that 21% of Wisconsin's workforce earns less than \$17 per hour. Fulltime employment at \$17/hour yields \$35,360 annually.

With rising housing costs, the expiration of pandemic rental assistance, and the end of state and federal eviction bans, many Wisconsin citizens struggle to pay their rent. In 2022, 67% of the ALICE population in Wisconsin were rent-burdened (paying more than 30% of their income on rent) and 40% were severely rent burdened (paying more than 50% of their income on rent). Rent burden not only impacts housing stability, but it also has far-reaching physical and mental health implications, including increased risk for depression, anxiety, chronic diseases, and mortality.

A 2020 study by the World Economic Forum measured "social mobility" based on healthcare, education, tech access, work opportunities, and social protection. Seventeen of the 20 most socially mobile countries are in Europe. The United States ranked twenty-seventh among all the countries in the world for social mobility. The same study showed that it takes five generations in the United States to reach the mean income in our country.

Dr. Alexia Rehn, Director of The Gateway Project has some interesting data showing that housing instability is more likely to cause job loss than the reverse. A lot of hard-working people in Wisconsin are struggling financially. At the same time there are many opportunities for better paying jobs.

That brings us to The Gateway Collective, a development of St. John's Ministries that is constructing 72 housing units (from 1-4 bedrooms) in downtown Green Bay at City

Center Lofts. Recognizing housing instability is one of the biggest barriers to upward mobility, The Gateway Collective has committed to providing Socially Inclusive Housing:

Socially Inclusive Housing is high-quality workforce housing for all socioeconomic levels with a focus on social connection geared to improve life satisfaction, decrease cost of living, and increase civic engagement.

The project targets young professionals, cost-burdened families, and older, active adults, intending to promote upward mobility. The first step is to limit housing costs to 30% of family income in order to free up resources for other needs. But it does not stop there.

The Gateway Collective aims to create a diverse, supportive community in the project. Think of a traditional apartment building with narrow hallways and little tenant interaction. Isolation is a negative factor for those struggling to survive and so creating a supportive community is key to upward mobility. Gateway units have 16 foot-wide hallways under skylights that invite social interaction among the three target populations. In itself, that is an element promoting positive change. Other amenities include a fitness center and community meeting rooms.

The Gateway Collective will provide wraparound services onsite to address the human needs of the tenants. Services are designed to meet the spiritual, financial, social, emotional, physical, and occupational needs in the Gateway community. Ten percent of every monthly rent payment will be automatically put into a savings account. This will continue to grow for each tenant through their time at The Gateway Collective, ultimately available to each tenant to help them meet their own financial goals. A Community Resource Advocate will be onsite to connect tenants to community resources that address their needs and promote upward mobility. Connection to and coordination of the many services available in our area will play a vital partnership role in improving tenants' lives.

The Gateway Collective is the brainchild of Dr. Alexia Rehn who developed this as her doctoral project. The initial size (72 units) is impressive and will have a significant impact on downtown Green Bay. It addresses a vital need focused on an easily overlooked population, the working poor.

In our on-going search for skilled workers, we cannot ignore those already in the workforce who are struggling financially. The Gateway Collective is a focused effort based on international research to engage existing community resources to benefit these workers and develop the skilled workforce required for a successful regional economy. Many of us will be watching it closely hoping this unique project will be successful and then replicated in the coming years.