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Refugee housing crisis spurs action

Community leaders look at ways to help tenants

By [Lucinda Dillon Kinkead](#)

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A formidable group of community and business leaders put their heads together Wednesday in an attempt to solve a looming housing crisis slated to displace hundreds of low-income Salt Lake residents — mostly refugees resettled here from war-torn regions such as Somalia, Sudan and eastern Europe — by the end of the summer.



Veronique Moses comforts Mariamo Jamossa at the former Hartland Apartments. Moses tutors many of the children, whose families are facing eviction.

Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News

Because of escalating rents and lost federal aid, tenants from up to 175 units of an apartment complex known to most as the Hartland, at 1700 South and Redwood Road, face moving elsewhere — or to the streets — and away from services on which they rely. Due to expiring leases and other problems, at least six dozen families — many of them Bantu — have already moved, and many more at the complex are facing imminent deadlines.

Wednesday's session at the United Way offices was called to mull alternatives.

A possible answer? Purchasing the complex from its current owners.

"This crisis has touched all walks of life," said Rosemarie Hunter, director of the University Neighborhood Partnership, which has worked closely with residents of the apartment complex. "The fact that so many people came to the table shows the scope of this issue," Hunter said.

Bankers, educators, social workers, community leaders, refugee resettlement experts, University of Utah officials and representatives from the Catholic Diocese and LDS Church all gathered to see what could be done.

"Most everyone in the rooms saw the value in keeping that (property) affordable," said Robert Rendon, senior vice president and director of community reinvestment for Zions Bank.

About 50 concerned people who attended the meeting agreed someone must try to buy back the property, now renamed the Seasons at Pebble Creek, from a San Francisco-based group that recently bought it, raised rents \$50 to \$200 and is now renewing leases.

The meeting signaled formal efforts to do so, said Bill Crim, director of strategic initiatives and public policy for United Way, which organized the meeting. "This needs urgent attention."

For years, the collection of 300 apartments has been much more than a living space for its residents.

The complex is home to more than 1,000 adults and children from all over the world, including Africa, South America, central and eastern Europe and Mexico, as well as the United States.

More than 75 percent of the residents are non-native English speakers.

Hartland had been a resettlement site for the two primary refugee agencies in Salt Lake City. As a result, some of the units were subsidized for low-income residents.

In March, new owners increased the monthly rent. They also said that Section 8 vouchers, which subsidize rent, would no longer be accepted. After some lobbying by concerned groups, the owners and housing authorities were able to reach an agreement that vouchers from current residents would be accepted. But about 40 percent of residents there also have been supported by a federal rental assistance program that ends in August.

There is no replacement program, so there are no more funds to subsidize low rent for tenants.

Complicating the low-income issue is that many of the refugee residents have a significant learning curve when it comes to Western life. Many have lived in refugee camps for decades, and life skills that Americans take for granted — technology, language, bill paying and other complications of contemporary living — can take years for some refugees to learn.

Educators at area schools, social workers and a bevy of community groups came together early to help refugee children and adults with the difficult transitions.

Teams of faculty and students from the U. department of family and consumer studies began working early on with community partners and Hartland residents. They built a financial fitness program through the University Neighborhood Partnership-Hartland Center, an on-site campus where a variety of classes are offered in subjects like homebuyer education, health access, English as a second Language and early childhood programs.

"It's quite a unique situation there," Rendon said. "Those programs really help the families get oriented into our societies. If all those families are dispersed, it's going to be very difficult to rebuild that."

The new owners weren't present at Wednesday's meeting, but Zions Bank officials are in talks with them about buying the property, Rendon said.

Rendon couldn't say what the property is worth, but Salt Lake County property records show it valued at \$10 million in 2005, \$11.3 million in 2006 and proposed at \$16.2 million value for 2007.

Also raised in discussion Wednesday is the sobering fact: This is not an isolated problem. "There are other affordable housing complexes up for sale," Crim said. And the community must find a proactive way to deal with these concerns, he said.

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