



Monroe County Legislator Rachel Barnhart, left, with Ashley Williams, right, and her son, Sir Jones-Williams, 9. For the last four months the Williams family has been in emergency shelter while trying to find an apartment she can afford.

JUSTIN MURPHY/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

AN EVICTION AVOIDED

Single mom's fight to remain housed shows gaps in Monroe County's approach

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Finding affordable housing in a historically tight market is difficult in the best of circumstances.

Ashley Williams and her three children this autumn have not been in the best of circumstances. Their near-brush this past week with eviction highlights

the challenges facing families and public officials in ensuring people have a place to live.

For the last four months the Williams family has been in emergency shelter in the Econo Lodge hotel on West Henrietta Road. Williams has been trying throughout that time to find an apartment she can afford, but the odds have been stacked against her succeeding.

The state's rental housing allowance

is less than \$400 a month, far from adequate to afford anything.

Her ability to save more of her own money is hurt by a policy requiring her to contribute her son's monthly social services payment toward the cost of county-provided emergency housing, or else to prove she used it for an allowed expense.

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In November, that was winter coats for her children.

Most of the phone numbers on the list of options provided by the county are inoperable, Williams said. If she were to locate an available apartment and wanted to visit it, she'd first have to walk a mile to the nearest bus stop.

"It's embarrassing," she said. "My son just spent his birthday here. It's depressing."

Yet December dawns with a small bit of good news for Williams and her children: They will not be evicted.

She had received a letter from the Monroe County Department of Human Services recently saying she had lost eligibility for temporary housing assistance "as you have failed without good cause to ... (pursue) other housing options to locate permanent housing."

Her shelter at the Econo Lodge was scheduled to end at the start of this month. She did not know for much of this past week where she and her children would go next.

"I'm calling the numbers (the county) is giving me, and then (they) say I'm not looking," she said Tuesday. "It's not fair."

Now, however, the Monroe County Department of Human Service has rescinded the sanctions it had levied against Williams, she said Friday, meaning she and her children can remain at the Econo Lodge while she continues to search for permanent housing.

"They said they're not going to sanction me, but I still have to follow proper procedure," she said in a brief phone interview while in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"Emotionally, I've been a wreck. I feel bad for my children. I feel hopeless at times, because it's hard to get into a place."

Monroe County Legislator Rachel Barnhart had brought Williams' case to light. She said it's part of a growing pattern of evidence that the county is not doing enough to help people find temporary or permanent housing.

In cases like Williams', Barnhart said, the Monroe County is unnecessarily harsh in declaring people out of compliance and kicking them off assistance. That contention is supported by a 2018 report comparing counties throughout the state on how they provide public assistance.

"The county has discretion to specify what looking hard enough looks like," she said.

County Communicators Director Gary Walker called the press conference that Barnhart organized "an unfortunate, self-aggrandizing exercise in exploiting a family in their time in need" and said the county's hands are largely tied by state regulations.

He declined to comment on Williams' case in particular or to make anyone available for an interview.

Williams' situation is one of several recent examples of fissures in the local housing safety net – some of them seemingly caused by the county Department of Human Services itself.

- In July the county abruptly pulled the contract for emergency homeless shelter at the Motel 6 on Chili Avenue, sending families with children scrambling.

- A recently opened homeless shelter called Project HAVEN, meanwhile, said last month it was precariously close to shutting its doors for lack of funding.

- Most of the affected children are students in the Rochester City School District, where student transience has emerged as a major obstacle to academic reform.

Barnhart has been a steady critic of Monroe County Executive Adam Bello for not doing more to reform and buttress the Department of Human Services, including housing support. She unsuccessfully proposed a pilot expansion of housing subsidies using local funds.

"It's very clear that we're not giving people what they need to move into stable, permanent housing," she said Tuesday, calling the current approach "cruel and inhumane."

– *Justin Murphy is a veteran reporter at the Democrat and Chronicle and author of "Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York." Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/CitizenMurphy or contact him at jmurphy7@gannett.com.*