

OUTLOOK

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ISO: Affordable Housing for Public Workers

Most mornings, while his police buddies are still sipping their coffee, Arlington County Detective Rick Rodriguez is already on the interstate, making the long commute from his comfortable house in Frederick to Northern Virginia. As an 18-year veteran of the Arlington police force, Rodriguez enjoys working in the county because the pay and benefits are better than average and he knows the area well. He just can't afford to live there.

"I saw co-workers working a lot of off-duty jobs to pay the mortgage, and I don't have to work overtime," he says. "It's fine to work overtime when you're young and single, but once you have a wife and kids you don't want to do that anymore."

Rodriguez is not alone.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that, based on a 2001 study, nearly 95 million Americans do not have affordable housing. In the Washington region — the 10th-most expensive metropolitan area in the country, according to the coalition — the affordable-housing problem has reached crisis levels. From 2002 to 2006, the D.C. Housing Authority's waiting list for housing vouchers, a primary source of affordable-housing assistance, increased by 23,000 households.

Providing "workforce housing" is a major issue, because municipal employees are disproportionately affected by high housing costs. District government officials estimate that nearly half of their 30,000-plus employees live elsewhere, including about three-quarters of the city's police force.

Other local jurisdictions tell similar tales.

Recent published reports state that more than half of Fairfax County workers reside outside the county's boundaries, while nearly 90 percent of Alexandria's employees commute into that city. Maryland faces a similar problem; about 25 percent of Montgomery County teachers and 75 percent of its firefighters live outside the county.

In Arlington County, the amount of affordable housing declined by more than 50 percent from 2000 and 2005, with nearly 9,900 rental units becoming unattainable for households with incomes at or below 60 percent of the area's median income. Furthermore, since November 2004, owners of more than 2,200 rental units in Arlington have begun converting them to high-end condominiums and townhouses. Public servants such as Rodriguez frequently get elbowed out of the market. According to the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing, just 25 percent of Arlington's police force, 9 percent of its firefighters and fewer than half of its schoolteachers live in the county.

Providing affordable housing often requires a mix of political leadership, creative partnerships and local activism — a combination that has proved fruitful in Arlington. Last year, Arlington County officials wrangled with a proposal to redevelop part of Buckingham Village, a historic Depression-era garden apartment complex that had long provided affordable housing. At Buckingham Village, which is in a central part of the county where redevelopment has been rampant, three areas were targeted to be demolished to make way for upscale townhouses. This raised the ire of housing advocates and historic preservationists alike.

Last month, however, the Arlington County Board unanimously endorsed a plan that would allow redevelopment of part of Buckingham Village but also would include the construction and preservation of about 300 affordable housing units. The proposal includes a \$32.1 million outlay by the county to expand the Buckingham Village historic district and preserve affordable housing in that section, as well as in another section outside the historic district, illustrating how political muscle and creativity can support lower- and middle-income families. "The success of any local economy depends on all different people and all different income levels," says board member Chris Zimmerman.

If Arlington and other jurisdictions around the region take similar action regularly, future rookies on the police beat won't have to live as far away from their jobs as Rick Rodriguez does.

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