

Housing a constant need for McPherson

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Houses without adequate plumbing, landlords turning off the heat in the middle of winter, families couch surfing because they can't find affordable housing—Chris Goodson with the McPherson Housing Coalition has seen it all over the last 12 years since the housing coalition launched. “As an appraiser, I noticed a lot of things going on regarding living conditions of rental proper –ties,” Goodson said. “Now, with the housing coalition, the stories we hear are heart-breaking. We believe every person deserves a safe place to live, regardless of their circumstances.” The closure of an unlicensed McPherson mobile home park two months ago brought attention to the housing crisis Goodson has been aware of for years. While many in the community expressed surprise at the conditions of the mobile home park, Goodson knows it isn't the only property in the county that is unsafe. She also knows there isn't enough affordable housing available for the large number of people living in or right above the poverty line. “There are 1,300 people just above the poverty line,” Goodson said. “That means at any time, if those families have a loss of a job or an illness, they could be right down under the poverty line.” In McPherson, there are 100 units of income based housing. Goodson says there is a lengthy wait list for those units, with 65-80 people on the list. Families generally have to wait up to a year to be able to get into one of the units. There are 45 units of income-qualified housing in McPherson and there are 93 units of senior housing. Goodson says there is an additional 50-75 units of special needs housing, geared toward housing adults with disabilities. There are also 80 Section Eight housing units, but those also involve about a one-year wait. “There are about 300- 350 units in the city of McPherson for families that are low income,” Goodson said. “We need about 800.” The lack of affordable housing leaves low-income families vulnerable to living in unsuitable housing or homelessness. The state of Kansas does require minimum housing standards, which the city of McPherson can enforce. However, McPherson does not have a minimal rental standards code, like some communities in Kansas. “The state has minimum standards and lays out the guidelines,” McPherson City Administrator Nick Gregory said. “Every house has to have heat, every house has to have working plumbing and every house has to have working electrical. If we are made aware of situations where houses don't have those things, we can go in and address it.” One big barrier is finding out about a problem. Oftentimes, tenants are hesitant to report housing concerns because they are fearful of eviction and not having a home to live in at all. Gregory says the city is most frequently notified of problems when a tenant is preparing to separate from their current housing situation. Once they have secured new housing, they are more likely to call and report a home without plumbing or electrical. Minimal rental standards codes can be controversial. The codes do provide additional government oversight of landlords, which some are opposed to. There is also the added expense for the city, as far as employing someone to oversee the program and enforce the requirements. One benefit of the minimal rental standards codes is it gives tenants an option to hold landlords accountable. Currently, tenants are required to pursue remedies via civil court cases, something low income families cannot afford to do. Some communities, like Emporia and Salina, have implemented minimal rental standards codes and seen success with their efforts. Other communities have implemented the codes and then gone back to only enforcing the state minimum standards, due to push back from landlords and the difficulty with enforcing the codes. The minimum rental housing code for the City of Emporia reads: “The city of Emporia does its best to ensure that individuals living in Emporia have rights to decent housing. The city's minimum housing code for rental units sets the standard for some of the basic aspects of rental housing located within the city limits of Emporia. The main areas addressed are plumbing, heating system(s), electrical system(s), smoke detectors and egress requirements.” The city of Salina enacted a minimum rental housing code in 2013 that addresses the specific requirements for all property owners, including landlords. The following is a general summary of the types of property maintenance items contained in the property maintenance code: Exterior property areas maintained, grass mowed, no graffiti, etc. Maintenance of exterior, roof, overhangs, stairs, chimneys Maintenance of interior, plumbing, electrical, light and ventilation and exits The city of McPherson and the McPherson Housing Coalition are committed to increasing housing options in McPherson. The McPherson Housing Coalition is looking for additional options to assist families, who are homeless. The city continues to look for options to increase rental housing for all income levels. Gregory says the city is constantly trying to add housing in all income levels. The city often partners with developers, offering incentives for building low to moderate-income housing. “We have a major need for rental housing in general,” Gregory said. “It is something we are constantly working on; we are constantly trying to add housing. As quick as they are built, they are rented.”