Undergraduate struggles: housing insecurity amongst UNH students

How is the housing crisis affecting students and what has the university done to help?

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In the spring of 2023, Justin Gagne walked into Thompson Hall (T-Hall) looking for someone, anyone, who could help him overcome his housing challenges. Gagne was a fourth-year civil engineering student living in Dover, New Hampshire, unable to afford his $900 monthly rent.

Gagne lived in Dover with his mother prior to attending the University of New Hampshire (UNH). College was not the first time he experienced issues with housing; he was accustomed to helping his mother afford their rent. However, when he came to UNH, Gagne realized that his housing challenges would soon snowball into a financial crisis.

“From my experience, working and doing school was really challenging at times, because in order to afford a place to live, I had to work. And in order to do well in school, I had to focus on school. And I couldn’t do both,” he said.

Gagne almost dropped out his sophomore year. He was a chemical engineering major “not doing really well;” he said he was failing classes, working constantly to afford rent and the pandemic had just hit. Rather than giving up his degree, he switched to a major he felt was more manageable: civil engineering.

“I felt like I had to get a degree from a four-year university because that’s what I thought, at the time, I would need to survive and be able to live comfortably for myself and family,” he said.

Gagne was attending the university for free thanks to a grant that covered the cost of tuition. If he had dropped out and decided he wanted to come back, he would have had to pay full in-state tuition, which would have come to just over $60,000 for four years. He didn’t want to give up his opportunity.

As a student, Gagne worked at Hannaford in Durham and Dover, and Three Chimneys Inn before becoming a Doordash dasher during the pandemic. Switching jobs helped him balance his studies, but he was still scraping by.

“Sometimes I would just go without eating during the day, and that kind of worked for me, but at the same time it was not great because I didn’t feel great,” he said.

To combat housing insecurity, the university implemented the Inn-Between program in 2019 as part of a more comprehensive “basic needs” program.
Inn-Between works with students who experience housing insecurity and UNH Housing to provide temporary assistance or housing placements in some residence halls. During the 2022-2023 academic year, Inn-Between helped five students find and pay for housing. This past summer, the program assisted eight more, though Patty Mathison, UNH basic needs coordinator, believes this number is hard to quantify and that more than 13 students have received assistance.

“We have students who are living in their cars, with mold concerns, who’ve had fires, experienced domestic violence. Inn-Between is really meant to be emergency housing assistance. We work with students to find more long-term, sustainable housing but the program itself is short-term,” said Mathison.

After going to T-Hall, Gagne was put in contact with Mathison. He qualified for the Inn-Between program and was granted money for two months’ worth of rent, just what he needed to make it until his first paycheck from his new job at Wright-Pierce, a Portsmouth-based engineering firm.

Gagne says the outcome was worth all the stress. In New Hampshire, the starting salary for a civil engineer is about $66,000 a year.

“Now I can pay my bills, save for my future and maybe make a long-lasting career, who knows?” he said.

For students who need longer-term help, it’s really challenging to find sustainable housing, Mathison said. To do so, Mathison and the university work with community partners like Waypoint, 211 and Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These organizations assist young people in finding safe, long-term housing.

UNH is not the only university in New Hampshire with a basic needs program; Plymouth State University has had its Student Support Foundation since 2005, an organization that provides students with short and long-term assistance. On the West Coast, the University of California’s 10 campuses each have a basic needs center that provides food, emergency housing and support services. The university receives $18.5 million annually in funding from the state to support the centers. The U.S. Department of Education also provides grants to eligible institutions across the nation to support basic needs programs.

One of the biggest issues here, Mathison said, is that the number of students in need has “exploded,” even in the few months since Gagne graduated.

“In addition to the housing crisis, inflation and the cost of living is just really difficult across the board. I think folks are struggling and so we’re seeing really high numbers of students requesting programs,” she said.

The 2023 New Hampshire Statewide Housing Needs Assessment noted that the State will need almost 90,000 more housing units by 2040, which includes the more than 23,500 additional units needed to meet the current housing demand. As a result, renting prices are at a record high.

The average rent in Durham for a one-bedroom apartment is $1,190 and $2,800 for a two-bedroom, according to Rent.com. In Dover, Gagne is paying a little under $1,000 a month for his room in a three-bedroom house.

“The hope is that we can start looking at legislation and how we can make some changes across the state around housing support because the costs are just tremendously high,” Mathison said.

Students like Gagne are largely overlooked in the discussion of housing crises. According to the Temple University Hope Center’s analysis of National Center for Education Statistics data, 8% of undergraduates and 4.6% of graduate students experience homelessness.

This number of students in need is larger considering students like Gagne, who are not homeless but struggle to make ends meet and balance the pressures of academics with affording necessities like food and shelter.

One of the biggest challenges for Mathison is finding these students.

“There’s a stigma around asking for help but also maybe not wanting a lot of people to know about their situation, so how people find their way to us is always a challenge,” said Mathison.
Gagne is grateful for the support he received and urges others with similar experiences to use the resources available.

“Reach out to Patty. Even if you're not sure if you qualify, you should still reach out,” Gagne said. “Call people. Don’t be afraid or ashamed, you’re not the only one going through it.”