

# Apartments going empty as hiring law hits migrants

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Arizona's employer-sanctions law is driving illegal immigrants to leave the state, as intended.

The departures were first felt at stores and businesses that cater to such immigrants. Sales suddenly dropped.

Now, apartment complexes, especially those with affordable rents in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations, are feeling the effects. Individuals and entire families are moving, leaving behind empty apartments that can't be filled.

Some renters are handing over their keys and breaking leases because they've lost their jobs due to the sanctions law and can't pay the rent. Others are simply skipping out in the middle of the night.

"Most folks aren't even telling us; they are just leaving," said Estela Bojorquez, manager of the Villa de Sonora apartments in west Phoenix, which is trying to fill 59 vacant apartments out of a total of 156. Bojorquez attributes half of the vacancies to illegal immigrants moving out of the state because of the sanctions law. Job losses because of a slowdown in the economy - especially in housing construction, which employs many immigrants - also are contributing to the departures.

It's the same story across town at the Mountain Vista apartments in south Phoenix. The 190 apartments at the complex off Roeser Road were 99 percent full just a few months ago, before the sanctions law went into effect Jan. 1. Now, 19 apartments, or about 10 percent of the total, are vacant.

More families are moving out every week, and there are few new families to replace them.

"Usually, you have lots of people coming in, lots of traffic. But it's been very slow," manager Selena Muñoz said.

At another complex nearby with 115 apartments, 24 families have moved out in the past two months. The manager estimates the complex is losing \$10,000 a month because of the vacancies.

"People are losing their jobs. They can't pay their rent. It's because of all the new laws," said Alfredo, the manager. He asked that his last name and the name of the complex not

be published because he fears immigration officials will come and arrest tenants. "A lot of people are taking off to other states, and most of them (are going) to Mexico."

### **Losing jobs**

The sanctions law is pushing immigrants to leave the state. The law is aimed at clamping down on illegal immigration in Arizona, which has the highest share of illegal immigrants of any state, by threatening to yank the business licenses of employers caught knowingly employing such workers.

The law also requires businesses to electronically verify the work eligibility of all new hires as of the first of this year.

To avoid sanctions, employers have been letting go workers who can't prove they have permission to work in the U.S.

As a result, many immigrants are leaving, either to other states where they think it will be easier to get jobs, or back to Mexico, where the majority of illegal immigrants in Arizona are from.

Fidel Covarrubias, 28, was renting a two-bedroom apartment at the Villa de Sonora complex on Thomas Road near 59th Avenue for \$690. On Monday, he and his wife and four children were packing up their bags in preparation to move to Texas. He turned in his apartment keys the same day and told the manager they were moving.

The construction worker explained that his hours had been cut to just one or two days a week because housing construction is so slow. His wife, meanwhile, lost her job cleaning restrooms at Metrocenter mall at the beginning of the month because of the sanctions law. With the first day of February approaching, they decided to move to Dallas, where they have relatives.

"The rent is due, and we couldn't pay it, so we are leaving," Covarrubias said.

### **Empty apartments**

No one knows for sure how many immigrants are leaving Arizona because of the sanctions law. But apartment complexes with affordable rents in areas with large numbers of immigrants are being hit hardest by the departures.

The departures are coming at a bad time for landlords. The slow economy is making it hard for some apartment dwellers to cover their rent. And others are renting houses instead of apartments as those rents have fallen because of the housing-market collapse.

"It's a pretty soft (apartment) market to begin with," said Terry Feinberg, president of the Arizona Multihousing Association.

The state's apartment-vacancy rate hit 10.1 percent during the third quarter of 2007, up from 7.7 percent during the third quarter the year before, he said.

Data for the fourth quarter won't be out until next week, but Jodi Bart, co-owner of MEB Management Services, expects Arizona's apartment-vacancy rate to hit 15 percent for the first time in years. Her company manages 60 apartment complexes in Arizona, totaling about 15,000 units.

She says the slow economy and competition from rental houses are the biggest factors contributing to the spike in apartment vacancies. But immigrants leaving Arizona because of the sanctions law is also a factor.

"There is no doubt that there is some of that going on," she said.

### **No renting sanctions**

In other parts of the country, some cities have passed laws that ban landlords from leasing apartments to illegal immigrants. Arizona's sanctions law, however, pertains only to employment.

The requirements for renting an apartment vary by complex, but generally, most require a photo ID, a credit check and a criminal-background check, Feinberg said.

Some apartments require tenants to prove they are in the country legally. Others don't, Feinberg said. Fair-housing laws, however, say that whichever policy apartments follow, the same requirements must be applied equally to all tenants to avoid discrimination, he said.

As vacancies rise, some apartment complexes are taking steps to make sure immigrants know they are welcome.

The managers of Mountain Springs Terrace Apartments in north Phoenix have been handing out fliers on the street that say in Spanish: "We don't question your immigration status. Come rent an apartment from us today. It's easy to do and we don't have problems with the sheriff." The last sentence is a reference to Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's crackdown on illegal immigration.

To attract renters, other apartments are passing out fliers in English and Spanish that offer move-in specials as low as \$99 a month.

"We're giving away the farm," said Bojorquez, the manager at Villa de Sonora.