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## In Wyoming, Many Jobs but No Place to Call Home

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Matthew Staver for The New York Times

On a recent night, Tiffany Kipp cooked dinner at the shelter where she and her family are staying. [More Photos »](#)

CASPER, Wyo. — After losing everything last year to Southern California's soured economy, Tiffany Kipp and her family packed up three boxes and a diaper bag and caught a Greyhound bus to Wyoming, their best chance at a fresh start.

They were drawn to Wyoming, where Ms. Kipp has family, by the promise of plentiful jobs and a booming energy sector, and a thin hope of rebuilding their futures on the High Plains. But like a growing number of people here, they ended up on the underside of the boom.

Unable to scrape together enough money for an apartment, the Kipps, who once rented a four-bedroom house north of Los Angeles, bounced from motel rooms to friends' couches. They ended up in a single room at a shelter run by a local nonprofit organization.

“We lost everything,” said Ms. Kipp, 25, whose husband works for an [oil](#) services company. “We needed somewhere to go.”



Matthew Staver for The New York Times

Tiffany and Justin Kipp were drawn to Casper, Wyo., last year by the promise of jobs. Mr. Kipp found one, but the couple still could not afford an apartment. The Kipps and their two children landed in a shelter.

There is a surprising downside to Wyoming's economic resilience and its 5.1 percent unemployment rate: a sharp rise in homelessness.

As another winter settles in, many people who moved here fleeing [foreclosures](#) and chasing jobs in the oil, gas and coal industries now find themselves without a place to live. Apartments are scarce and expensive, and the economy, while strong, is not growing at the swift pace of drilling towns in western North Dakota, where cashiers can earn \$20 an hour and fast-food workers can be paid thousand-dollar signing bonuses.

As homeless rates held steady nationwide last year, federal data show that [Wyoming's homeless population](#) soared by 67 percent, to 1,813 people from 1,083 in 2011. Advocates attribute the surge in part to a more aggressive attempt to count the state's homeless.

As in any other place in the country, many homeless people in Wyoming have lived on the streets for years or suffer from mental illness or drug and alcohol addictions. But social service workers say they have seen a growing number of economic migrants from Florida and Michigan, Wisconsin and California, with nowhere to settle.

“They’d pack up their pit bulls, their children and they’d move to Wyoming with nothing, just the clothes on their backs,” said Lily Patton, a housing counselor with Interfaith of Natrona County, a nonprofit group. “They keep saying, ‘I’ve never been in this situation before.’ ”

When jobs elude them or a trip to the hospital eats away at their money, some of these new arrivals and returnees visit social service groups to find a way out of town: enough money to fix their car or catch a bus back home. But caseworkers said most were determined to stay and came seeking housing.

Around Casper, population 56,000, robust growth in oil and gas drilling has helped cut unemployment to 4.3 percent, but the boom has also made it nearly impossible for struggling families to find an apartment. Vacancy rates are close to 1 percent, housing officials say, and two-bedroom apartments can rent for \$800 to \$1,000, out of reach for many of the working poor.

Advocates say the town's few shelters and temporary housing are full, and the wait for low-income apartments has swelled to as long as two and a half years. On particularly bitter nights, when the wind tears in from the west and temperatures plummet, homeless advocates spread mattresses on their office floors or set out space heaters in storefronts to accommodate people who might otherwise freeze.

“We literally do not have anyplace for people to live,” said Marilyn Dymond Wagner, the executive director of Interfaith. “Where are all these people coming from?”

John Meek, 56, came from Altamonte Springs, Fla., north of Orlando, where “you couldn’t buy a job,” he said. In July, a friend from Wyoming visited and told Mr. Meek about the opportunities here: jobs that paid \$18 and \$19 an hour for anyone who walked in the door.

“Like a worm on the hook, I bit,” Mr. Meek said.

He found work on the night shift at a pipe extrusion plant, but the job paid only \$10 an hour, and those hours have been erratic lately, he said. He has worked only a handful of shifts since Christmas.

Like others, he is staying at a motel, the [Royal Inn](#), where weekly rents run about \$250. But Mr. Meek is quickly falling behind. He and a friend met with a landlord but were told they could not sign a lease without \$3,000 cash for the rent and the security deposit.

Still others are squeezed into subsidized single-room occupancy apartments or live out of campers in RV parks. Ms. Patton, the housing counselor, recalled one woman from Denver who came to town last summer looking for work. She pitched a tent at a campground on the west side of town and told her two children they were going on an extended camping trip.

At night, the far edge of a Walmart parking lot on the east side of town is transformed into an impromptu campground. Pickup trucks and minivans driven by people looking for a place to sleep slip into the spaces where the night-shift workers park, to blend in and reduce the chance anyone will notice them.

Among those in the parking lot is Chrystal Wise, 39, who spends the cold nights on the bench seat of her 2005 Dodge Durango. Her husband once worked in the oil fields in North Dakota, she said, but became addicted to [methamphetamines](#) and lost his job. After losing their apartment in Casper in April, Ms. Wise sent her 15-year-old son to stay with friends, and she and her husband made the truck their home.

This is the first winter she has been homeless, and she never thought she could be so cold. She said she turns on the engine once or twice each night to run the heater, but she cuts it quickly to save gas, and the cold seeps back in. The nights seem to stretch on forever.

At 7 a.m., Ms. Wise wakes up, scrapes the frost from the windshield and drives to a nearby truck stop to wash herself and clean off her work uniform. Then she heads to work at the [Hamburger Stand](#), where she makes \$7.60 an hour — barely enough to pay for food, gas and the \$450 monthly payments on her truck. Getting an apartment feels like a distant dream.

“I’m just lost,” she said.

If families like the Wises are strained by splitting up, others are trying to stay afloat by doubling up. Angela Morgan and her two teenagers moved back to Wyoming last January from Texas. She got a job cleaning hotel rooms for \$9.50 an hour and worked as many shifts as the week allowed. But as the economy slowed for the winter and tourists headed toward the ski slopes 300 miles away, Ms. Morgan’s hours were cut to eight per week. She ran out of money to pay

for propane or electricity, her pipes froze and the landlord taped an eviction notice to the door of her mobile home.

Now, she and her children are staying with friends, all six of them crammed into a single mobile home at the Aspen Park trailer court. Ms. Morgan's friend Misty Elfering has been welcoming, but Ms. Morgan worries about what she will do now.

"I came back for some stability, for some hope," she said. "It didn't work out that way. Now, I'm just trying to survive the winter."