

“There’s this very delicate balance of workforce housing in Park City, and no one really wants to mess with it. It certainly seems like the burden falls on the private citizens at this point.” — Matt Farinelli | Summit County landlord who rents a townhome

Landlords

By Lindsey Ward

scheduled with his tenants for the next day. They replied that they’d been called out of the country for a “family emergency” — all five of the students on the lease — and had left the keys on the counter.

“That’s not great,” Farinelli recalled thinking. “And that was Monday night. So I went the next morning and did a quick walkthrough and was, quite frankly, so pissed off. I just had to leave.”

A rotting pineapple, abandoned clothes, cigarette smoke and truckloads of trash contributed to the close to \$20,000 hit Farinelli estimates he took after deciding last November to try to be part of the solution to Park City’s seasonal worker housing shortage.

The students may have abandoned his townhouse. But in the aftermath, Farinelli felt even more forsaken by the police and the local resorts and businesses that heavily rely on J-1 workers each winter. They call on area residents to house the students. Yet he said when he asked for their help, they shut him out. Farinelli won’t be renting to J-1s again anytime soon as a result, he said, and he’s not alone. Other homeowners have begun wondering if renting to foreign students is really worth the trouble. If they decide it’s not, where will all the workers live?

“It just feels like this thing no one wants to touch,” Farinelli said.

“There’s this very delicate balance of workforce housing in Park City,” he added, “and no one really wants to mess with it. It certainly seems like the burden falls on the private citizens at this point. And no one wants to back them up.”

ADDING HOUSING TO THE COMMUNITY

It felt like the right thing to do.

Farinelli and his wife have lived in Summit County for nearly 20 years. In that time, they’d borne witness to many of the issues that accompanied Park City’s rapid-fire growth into a well-known ski town. One of which is its reliance on J-1 workers.

Between high unemployment rates and more people able to work from home, seasonal workers have become increasingly difficult to come by, especially since the pandemic. And many Americans who prefer seasonal work are now pushing for higher wages and health benefits. As a result, resort towns like Park City have become increasingly dependent upon foreign students enrolled in the Summer Work Travel Program to provide ski resorts, hotels, restaurants, bars and ski shops a consistent source of labor.

Better known as J-1s for the name of their visa, the typically 18- to 23-year-olds who come to Park City usually hail from South and Central American countries. They sign \$200-a-hour contracts to work no less than 30 hours a week, often starting Dec. 1 and ending March 31. Many also pick up second jobs as bartenders or bussers.

It’s a win-win program, except for one thing. Finding a place to live in Park City is close to impossible. Only about 12% of workers live in the city, according to data from the Ken C. Gordon Institute, so there’s not much room for a transient student making \$1,200 a month. This season, though, five



Top Carpet stains, a bowl of cereal and an empty beer can were left on an ottoman in a Kimball Junction townhome that was rented to five seasonal workers from November 2023 to April 2024. **Above** A collection of empty alcohol bottles occupies a shelf of the townhome, where Matt Farinelli estimates the renters caused close to \$20,000 in damage.

students — though Farinelli now believes that number exploded to at least a dozen — found shelter in Farinelli’s three-bedroom Kimball Junction townhouse.

“We’re well aware of how much the town needs this labor,” Farinelli said. “Like, ‘Let’s be the good people and we’ll try it and hopefully it works out.’ That was kind of

our reasoning. And now we’re like, ‘Man, that risk is definitely not paying off.’”

FINDING TENANTS

At least 100 J-1s responded to their ad, Farinelli estimates. The group they selected knew someone in town who could look at the home in person. The Farinellis had

rented the place out multiple times to longer-term tenants, and none of their initial interactions gave them pause. In fact, they offered a reduced rent since they required a six-month lease, which is longer than the tenants expected to stay. They held a month’s rent for a security deposit. Given the age of the tenants, they expected some wear and tear,

but nothing like what Farinelli saw when he stepped into the townhouse the day after he learned they had all left the country.

Trash. In a 10-minute video Farinelli took of his initial walkthrough, he uttered some variation of the word “trash” at least 30 times. A bowl of cereal drenched in milk sat on a coffee table next to an empty beer can. Banners bore long scars as if someone had slid down them on cafeteria trays. Holes had been punched into doors. Jackets, shirts, even skis had been abandoned on beds and in closets, along with bags and tags. Farinelli said it took three trips for a junk service to haul it all away.

Before the cleanup began, Farinelli called the sheriff. He knew officers couldn’t do much to help him since his tenants had left the country. Still, he hoped to get the damage on record in a police report. Maybe, he thought, a warrant could be issued so if they ever returned to the United States, they couldn’t do the same to someone else.

Instead, he said he couldn’t even get a case number.

“It was pretty frustrating,” Farinelli said. “They legitimately just were like, ‘We’re not going to come talk to you.’”

Sgt. Felicia Sotelo, a spokesperson for the Summit County Sheriff, said someone from the agency had taken Farinelli’s call and a case number had been issued. She said more urgent matters can keep a deputy from making a site visit. However, she also expressed surprise that Farinelli had been told he had no case.

“If someone is renting and property is damaged, we can absolutely look into it,” she said. “Sometimes it’s a criminal matter and sometimes it’s a civil matter.”

Farinelli said he felt similarly dismissed when he asked one of his tenants’ employers for assistance. He said through the course of conversation early in the rental period, some of the tenants said they worked at Park City Mountain. Yet when he contacted Park City Mountain seeking a permanent address or, ideally in his mind, the garnishment of their wages until they could resolve the dispute, he said he got no response.

In a statement emailed to The Tribune, Park City Mountain communications director Sara Huey emphasized ways in which the resort is participating in “community solutions” for the seasonal worker housing deficit. She did not address whether employers have an obligation to intervene in conflicts between landlords and seasonal workers.

“We are committed,” she wrote, “to helping to address affordable housing in our community — including through our master lease for employee housing at Slopeside Village, our commitment of \$250,000 to Mountainlands Community Housing Trust toward the Holiday Village and Parkside Apartments affordable housing redevelopment, and other important community solutions.”

Technically, employers are not responsible for helping J-1 workers find housing. That burden falls on the student’s sponsor. Sponsors are Department of State-approved agencies that receive money both from the students and employers to match the two, provide visas and oversee the cultural and logistical aspects of a student’s stay.

They tend to take a very

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POOL