

“The housing situation, it’s really tough. And so I imagine there were a lot of tenants in the [Farinelli rental] home and that’s likely what led to the damage.” — Megan McKenna | Housing advocate for Mountainlands Community Housing Trust

Landlords

Continued from PREVIOUS PAGE

hands-off approach, those familiar with the process say. Rather than directly connect students with landlords, they more often refer them to sites like Zillow and Trulia. Check-ins are done via monthly email surveys. Still, few students speak up about inadequate housing, advocates say, for fear of having to return home early.

For this reason, Megan McKenna, a housing advocate for the nonprofit Mountainlands Community Housing Trust, said workers are more likely to be taken advantage of than landlords.

“It’s really not very common that we hear about situations like this,” she said of Farinelli’s predicament. “It’s often the other way around, that we hear about seasonal workers being taken advantage of or misled by a landlord or online scams, which seem to be getting more common.”

If property owners like Farinelli get burned while trying to treat J-1s fairly, and more rooms are taken off the market, that more broadly opens up the market to bad actors. One example of that was exposed last year when The Tribune reported on a group of 12 seasonal workers who, with the landlord’s apparent permission, were living in a one-bedroom apartment and paying \$12,000 a month in rent.

Conversely, those bad actors, McKenna said, are probably why Farinelli found mold, IDs and a sleeping chart indicating at least 12 people had called his townhouse home over the winter.

“The housing situation, it’s really tough. And so I imagine there were a lot of tenants in the home and that’s likely what led to the damage,” she said. “And I think it just is more evidence of the housing crisis that we’re in and that people are finding themselves in less than ideal living situations. And that goes for the landlord and the tenant.”

Mountainlands and other organizations have set up resources to help J-1 workers find housing and navigate life in Park City. One of the most prominent ones is the International Student Housing Task Force. Originally organized by the Christian Center of Park City in 2019, it encourages residents to open their homes to foreign students.

Mountainlands also created the Workforce Employer Rental Incentive Program (aka, WE RIP), which provides extra motivation for locals to rent out spare rooms or basements. Currently, Deer Valley Resort is the only business to participate in the program. Anyone who rents a room to a Deer Valley employee for the season can receive a season pass or 10 one-day passes.

However, as an added benefit, program participants know they can reach out to Mountainlands if tenant issues arise, McKenna said. If Mountainlands can’t resolve it, she said, they’ll enlist the services of the Mountain Mediation Center.

McKenna pointed out that landlords tend to have more leverage than tenants in Utah. She said anyone looking to rent to seasonal workers can find resources and sample leases at a local Housing Resource Center or library. If issues do arise, she encourages them to also seek guidance through Mountainlands or the Mountain Mediation Center.

If sponsors aren’t responding, McKenna suggested reporting the issue to the state department.

She cringes at the idea of



BETHANY BAKER | The Salt Lake Tribune

Becky Yih walks through a basement that she has rented to foreign seasonal workers, known as J-1s, in her home in Park City. Yih and her husband have rented out their basement for more than a decade but are considering calling it quits after difficulties with recent tenants.



A drawer is torn off a vanity in a Kimball Junction townhome that was rented to five seasonal workers from November 2023 to April 2024. The owner, Matt Farinelli, said he got no help from the workers' employers nor the police after they left the country prior to the exit walkthrough. He estimates they caused close to \$20,000 in damage to the home.

losing more housing for seasonal workers.

“The effect of fewer local landlords renting to seasonal workers would be devastating to seasonal workers and the economy,” she wrote in an email. “It would mean fewer jobs filled and more commuters. It’s already such a low number [who rent to J-1s], which is why we’re trying to incentivize more to participate in the WE RIP program and provide more preventative education/resources to landlords, tenants, employers, and sponsors.”

For Farinelli, the issue wasn’t so much mediation as just re-establishing

communication once his tenants left the country. He said he regrets not taking down a list of their sponsors as well as collecting their permanent addresses. Those were his rookie mistakes.

Yet even some longtime J-1 landlords and advocates have grown weary of rolling the dice on seasonal renters.

HOSTING YOUNG PEOPLE AND MAKING CONNECTIONS

Becky Yih, a founder of the International Student Housing Task Force, is one of them. She has rented the basement apartment and, more recently,

the guest room in her Kimball Junction townhouse to seasonal workers for more than a decade. She’s made some connections she treasures in that time. Still, her last batch of tenants — three young women — tested her mettle. They were slovenly, she said, and consistently broke house rules.

“I have just been such a proponent for so long. But after having that bad experience myself, I don’t feel like I would encourage anyone to do it,” she said. “I mean, I don’t want to discourage anyone from doing it. But I don’t want to feel like I talked somebody into it and then what if they had a bad experience?”

Still, Yih doesn’t believe the students are the problem.

Through her advocacy work, she has pushed for the city and county to look at how other resort towns are handling the situation and adopt some of their policies. Changes to fire codes and other laws could dissuade bad actors — including those woven into the system, such as sponsors and employers.

She also believes more support is needed for community members who want to help, like Farinelli.

So far, she said, she hasn’t found an audience.

“I think other places have tried to be more conscientious about it,” she said. “And I just feel like there’s no will to do that. I mean, we’re still just getting by.”

A HAPPY ENDING

In the end, it was the students’ sponsors who came through for Farinelli.

He had to use all his contacts to track down which sponsors usually worked with Vail Resorts, since he said Park City Mountain’s people stopped returning his emails. Once he narrowed it down to three, he sent them messages explaining the situation and the names of his tenants.

One responded and offered to help. Within a half day, Farinelli said, one of the students reached out.

“All of a sudden, they went from radio silent to all of them willing to pay us last month’s rent,” Farinelli said. “That’s how they got back in touch with us. So we’re fairly certain, though I can’t say for sure, that the company reached out to them and was like, ‘Hey, if you ever want to go back to America, I strongly suggest you re-engage.’”

After a few weeks of negotiations, Farinelli said he was able to recoup most of what the episode cost him. Yet the damage had already been done. He and his wife swore they wouldn’t go through that again and have since sold the townhouse.

“Our honest advice to people if they came to us now and said, ‘Well, would you rent to a group of J-1s?’ he said, ‘I’d be like, ‘No, absolutely not.’”

“Yih hasn’t jumped off that cliff yet. She is, however, peering into the precipice.”

“I think about it a lot. It’s just been such a part of our lives,” she said. “Could I do this again or have I just reached my tipping point?”