

STUDENTS TAKE HOUSING FROM THE POOR

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Published June 2004

Iowa City, Ia. -University of Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz, who earned \$1,950,000 last year, lives in a \$946,000 house -one advantage of being the state government's highest-paid employee.

Ferentz's son, Brian, a football player for the Hawkeyes, lived dirt-cheap this past school year in an apartment complex that was built for the poor -an advantage of being a college student with little or no income in the eyes of the federal government.

But as a full-scholarship athlete, Brian Ferentz receives free tuition, and the university also pays him \$406 a month for housing and \$298 a month for food and other college expenses.

Ferentz is not the only student to avail himself of taxpayer-subsidized housing. Roughly 200 U of I students, including dozens of athletes, lived this past school year in apartments in Iowa City that are intended for needy families, elderly people and people with disabilities.

At the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, dozens of students, primarily athletes, also have capitalized on their temporary low-income status to get into an apartment complex where the federal government pays most, or all, of their rent.

A Des Moines Sunday Register investigation found that in many college towns across the nation -in places like Ann Arbor, Mich., Norman, Okla., and State College, Pa. -growing numbers of students and athletes are learning through word-of-mouth what Iowa and Nebraska students already know:

Virtually any student -regardless of his or her economic background -is legally eligible to live free of charge, or at a greatly reduced price, in low-rent apartments because of changes the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development made a decade ago in the eligibility rules for its "Section 8" housing program.

But the presence of middle-class and even affluent students such as Ferentz in such housing greatly frustrates advocates for the poor, who say they are trying to cope with the worst low-income housing crisis in a generation. In Iowa City, Lincoln and elsewhere, the advocates say, thousands of working-poor families, homeless people, the elderly and the disabled face record or near-record waiting lists to get into subsidized apartments.

"I think it's outrageous that any college student -whether a chemistry major or an athlete -would be living in public housing," said Jim Cain of Des Moines, head of the Iowa Coalition for Housing and the Homeless. "It's outrageous that you would have them getting a free ride at the public's expense."

HUD officials declined to answer questions about the eligibility rules or the presence of students from middle-class or affluent families in the subsidized apartments. A HUD official said the regulations are under review.

Bob Bowlsby, the U of I athletics director and Kirk Ferentz's boss, said: "It does beg the question as to whether students should be in this kind of housing at all. I could capably argue either side of it."

The taxpayer's role

The Des Moines Sunday Register found that Pheasant Ridge, a well-kept complex with 248 apartments, was half-filled this past school year with U of I students, including Ferentz and at least 34 other Hawkeye athletes. All of Pheasant Ridge's residents qualify for the subsidized housing because they are classified as low income under the HUD rules.

Tenants pay anywhere from nothing to a few hundred dollars per month. The nation's taxpayers pay the remainder of the rent and utilities -a total of nearly \$1.4 million to Pheasant Ridge in the past year.

The students are eligible to live in Pheasant Ridge and similar Section 8 apartment complexes because HUD expanded the definition of "low income" a decade ago. There are three key elements in the agency's income eligibility rules:

- * Based on regular income that an applicant earns from a full-time or part-time job.
- * Student financial aid is excluded. All forms of the aid -including full or partial scholarships, government Pell Grants and work-study wages, as well as athletes' housing and meal stipends from a university -are not counted as income.
- * Parents' income and any periodic assistance the students receive from their parents are disregarded.

Advocates for the poor say that means many more students nationally have become eligible for subsidized housing, taking increasingly scarce apartments that otherwise could go to truly impoverished people.

"When students that universities give scholarships to take advantage of the most affordable housing available to people, I think that's a violation of the public's trust," said Cain, the housing organization official.

Brian Ferentz and his father declined requests from the Des Moines Sunday Register for interviews. They also declined to say how much, if anything, Brian Ferentz paid for rent at Pheasant Ridge.

In a written statement, Kirk Ferentz said: "It's my understanding that the students, including athletes, residing at the Pheasant Ridge complex meet applicable guidelines."

Phil Haddy, a spokesman for the U of I athletic department, said Kirk Ferentz is not supporting his son financially through college.

"Brian is not receiving any income from his father," Haddy said. "He wants his son to have a normal college experience like any other student."

Getting off welfare

HUD rewrote its eligibility regulations for the Section 8 program in 1995 to make it easier for struggling adults to go back to school for training that would enable them to get off welfare.

Applicants who are selected for low-income housing such as those at Pheasant Ridge pay rent that is based on 30 percent of what HUD considers to be their income. Those who do not work and have no other source of income pay nothing.

Some of the students and athletes living at Pheasant Ridge come from families having very low incomes, and those students would qualify under HUD's income rules even if their parents' wages were taken into consideration.

But other students, such as Hawkeye football player Robert Gallery, a senior last season from Masonville, are from middle-class backgrounds. Gallery, the second player to be chosen in this year's National Football League draft, is expected to receive a minimum \$15 million signing bonus to play professional football for the Oakland Raiders.

He did not respond to a request for an interview.

Steve Finley, Pheasant Ridge's manager, would not say how many athletes live in the apartment complex. He estimated, however, that university students occupy nearly half of the 248 units.

Visits to the complex, as well as comparisons of U of I students' Iowa City addresses, showed that at least 35 members of the Hawkeye men's football and wrestling teams, and the women's volleyball, softball and field hockey teams, lived at Pheasant Ridge during the past school year. The Iowa City addresses for members of the men's basketball team, along with some players in other sports, were not available and could not be compared with Pheasant Ridge addresses.

Not all college athletes receive full scholarships and reimbursement for their housing and meal expenses. Some athletes, especially in so-called minor sports, receive partial scholarships.

Several Hawkeye athletes who live at Pheasant Ridge declined to be interviewed on the record. They said privately that they pay no rent because they have no jobs. Other athletes said their rent was well below what typically is charged for apartments in the Iowa City area.

A 2003 survey provided by the Iowa City Housing Authority found that rents average \$612 a month in the Iowa City area.

Left out

Aimee Vasquez of Iowa City, an unemployed and divorced mother of three, is frustrated that dozens of U of I students live at Pheasant Ridge with taxpayer assistance and that she cannot get into the complex.

"It's not fair that all these athletes and students, who have parents out there to help with their schooling, are living in Pheasant Ridge," she said. "It's a different kind of poor. They don't know what it's like to be unable to pay your electric bill, clothe your children or worry about how you're going to put food on the table."

Vasquez, who is living on child-support payments while she looks for a job, pays \$399 a month to rent a run-down, two-bedroom apartment elsewhere in Iowa City for herself and her children, ages 9, 7 and 4. Because of credit problems brought on by her divorce, she was turned down when she applied to live in Pheasant Ridge, she said.

Vasquez is among at least 2,200 people waiting for low-income housing in Iowa City, where the only

homeless shelter is routinely filled because poor families have nowhere else to go.

She is trying to remain optimistic about finding a job. But she is worried that her only income -the child support -will end because her former husband recently quit his job.

"It's frustrating," Vasquez said. "Many of those students living out there are driving nice cars and wear designer clothes . . . and I can't even get into a subsidized apartment. Meanwhile, if I make too much from child support or a job, I can't qualify for the day-care assistance I need to work.

"It just seems like a situation where you just can't win."

Many students, on the other hand, have help available from their parents, from jobs on campus, or from government education loans to help with their college expenses, Vasquez said.

Housing officials said that under HUD's current regulations, college students may have a better chance than applicants such as Vasquez of being accepted to live in some subsidized complexes because they are less likely to be screened out, as Vasquez was, over credit problems or previous evictions. That's because college students typically have been living with their parents or in dormitories and are unlikely to have amassed much of a credit record of their own.

HUD is silent

Cain, the housing coalition executive, also noted that even single mothers who attend college today are required to work in order to receive public aid. And all of their income, including child support, is counted in determining their rent in government-subsidized apartments, he said, unlike students with scholarships.

HUD officials in Washington, D.C., and at the department's regional office in Kansas City, Mo., declined to grant interviews to discuss the income eligibility rules or the presence of middle-class or affluent students and athletes in subsidized complexes like Pheasant Ridge.

HUD spokeswoman Donna White said in a written statement that officials of the agency were reviewing their regulations and could make policy changes early next year.

"While we don't have statistics on how widespread it is, we have not been made aware of many cases," she said, referring to the Des Moines Sunday Register's findings in Iowa City.

University students have been applying more often in recent years to get into subsidized apartment complexes in many parts of the United States, including college towns such as Champaign, Ill., Bloomington, Ind., and Lafayette, Ind. Not all are being accepted -most often because there is a waiting list. But in some cities, housing authority officials or apartment managers said few students get in because officials give priority to more-needy applicants, such as single parents, the disabled or the elderly.

Judy Mauer, a housing programs assistant at the Centre County Housing Authority, where Penn State University is located, said a growing number of students there have qualified for HUD's subsidized housing.

"A lot of the students are not paying anything," she said. "In HUD's sense of the word, they are low income. But we have discussed on several occasions why we are helping them when they're eligible for other types of government aid."

Iowa City and Lincoln appear to have more athletes living in subsidized apartments than those in other major college towns, the Des Moines Sunday Register found. Housing officials said that may be because little subsidized housing is available in some college towns, such as Ames and Cedar Falls, or because students are unaware that they qualify for the low-rent apartments.

"Probably 60 to 70 percent of our tenants are students . . . but we don't have many athletes," said Codi Kenney, an assistant manager of Vicksburg Village, a Section 8 apartment complex in Norman, Okla. "I think we might have just one or two."

Like other apartment managers in the Midwest, Kenney said increasing numbers of students have been applying, but waiting lists prevent more from being accepted.

Housing administrators and athletic department officials said the poor conditions of some low-income housing complexes in large urban areas such as Miami and Los Angeles probably discourage students from applying for such housing.

Chris Huston, assistant sports information director for the University of Southern California, said he could not imagine any USC athletes wanting to live in Section 8 apartments near the school's Los Angeles campus.

The Lincoln picture

Western Manor, an apartment complex five miles west of Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, is Nebraska's version of Pheasant Ridge.

Newer sports cars and SUVs adorned with Cornhusker stickers stand out among the more run-down vans and cars in the parking lot -just as the young, chiseled athletes contrast with the young mothers, children and elderly who are their neighbors in the Section 8 complex.

Longtime residents say University of Nebraska athletes have lived at Western Manor since at least the days when "Touchdown" Tommy Frazier, one of the Cornhuskers' famous quarterbacks, was a tenant in the 1990s.

"I personally don't think students on scholarship should be living on this property, but there's nothing we can do," said Patricia Hill, who coordinates social services for Western Manor's residents. "It's frustrating. I'm supposed to be helping people, but short of having a keg down here, there's no way I'm going to be helping the student athletes."

A third of Western Manor's 80 tenants this spring were college students. Most were Cornhusker wrestlers, football players or basketball players from a mix of economic backgrounds, apartment managers said. Other athletes have lived in subsidized apartments scattered around Lincoln, city housing officials said.

"I would be very surprised if they could not find low-income families with children who needed that housing," said Chris Lamberty, assistant director of the Lincoln Housing Authority, referring to Western Manor's managers.

Julia Pagano of Lawrence, Kan., is attending the University of Nebraska on a dance scholarship. She said she learned about the low rent charged at Western Manor from her fiance, a former Nebraska wrestler who has lived there for three years. At first, she debated whether to move into the complex when she was accepted two years ago because she thought that other residents were there because they "probably didn't

have a thing.”

Pagano, who said she is struggling to make ends meet while working on her master’s degree, pays nothing in rent. Her fiance pays less than \$100.

“We don’t plan on being life residents,” she said. “But as long as one of us is in school, we’ll look for something like this.”

Barbara Huppee, executive director of the Lawrence-Douglas County Public Housing Authority in Kansas, called it “a mockery” for students who have other means of support to be living in subsidized apartments.

“Those buildings were built with government loans to serve the low income, not the temporarily low income,” she said.

A good deal

Bowlsby, the U of I athletics director, said the players who live at Pheasant Ridge are merely availing themselves of a good deal that HUD makes available to all students.

“It really isn’t an athletics issue,” he said. “It’s a student issue.”

He added, “I do think that reasonable people could disagree on whether they should be managing (Pheasant Ridge) differently.”

The National Collegiate Athletic Association, which governs sports at most of the nation’s colleges and universities, said athletes are permitted to live in government subsidized apartments, as long as the housing is available to all students and not just athletes. University officials connected to the athletic department are prohibited from making any special arrangements to get athletes into subsidized apartments, NCAA spokesman Erik Christianson said. U of I officials and athletes all said players learned about Pheasant Ridge from fellow students.

Josephine Potuto, a University of Nebraska law professor and the school’s faculty athletics representative in NCAA matters, said: “There is nothing in NCAA regulations that I know about that would prohibit students from taking advantage of the housing. Whatever the rules are, I think students are entitled to avail themselves to it. I don’t think it’s up to the university to trump what federal law currently authorizes.”

No worries

Eltigani Ali, a blind, disabled immigrant from Sudan, has lived at Pheasant Ridge since 1996.

“This is a very good place to live,” said Ali, who lives on Social Security disability payments. He pays \$139 a month for a two-bedroom apartment.

Chikezie Ejiasi, a U of I student, lives in the complex with his brother, Chigozi, a U of I football player. Together, the two pay \$120 a month for rent.

Chikezie Ejiasi said he works about 20 hours a week; his brother works very little because of his practice and workout schedule.

"It's nice because you don't have to worry about finding a job to pay rent," said Ejiasi, whose family lives in Cedar Rapids.

Because rent at Pheasant Ridge is based on 30 percent of the tenants' adjusted income, and financial aid is excluded from that tally, some students pay less than do single parents, the elderly or the disabled who live at the complex.

Sophomore Richard Kittrell, a Hawkeye football player, moved into Pheasant Ridge earlier this month. He said the free housing allows football players to focus on their sport without worrying about money. He said U of I football players are not allowed to work.

"It's a wonderful deal," said the Hamden, Conn., native, who learned of the cheap housing at Pheasant Ridge from upper-classmen on the football team.

Timothy Weddle, a Kirkwood Community College student, said he quit his job before he moved into Pheasant Ridge last March. That not only guaranteed free rent, he said, but it helped him improve his grade-point average.

Weddle's roommate, who he said also does not pay rent, is his cousin, Calvin Davis, a U of I football player.

"I had to quit," Weddle said, referring to his former job. "I couldn't do school and a job."