



HOMELESS & HOUSING COALITION OF KENTUCKY

This is the first part of a series following the housing journey of a Kentucky woman and her children who are using an ESG Housing Voucher. ESG (Emergency Solutions Grant) is a program administered by HHCK that assists individuals and families quickly regain stability in permanent housing after experiencing a housing crisis or homelessness.

“I may have to hop off here soon – I’m sorry!”, Tatum Nelson politely acknowledged as we finished up a phone call. Visiting her parents’ house with her three children – ages 5, 7, and 10 – in tow, the after-school crew had gotten rowdy, and it was time to head to the kitchen for snacks. Due with her 4th in March, we’d scheduled the call earlier in the day to talk about Tatum’s housing situation, which, after a terrifying start, had taken a recent, happy turn.

“You know – I had it all together. I really did”, Nelson began. “I owned a house, was in college, all that.” Our conversation started off going over the timeline and events that led to Tatum’s eventual housing insecurity, homelessness, and now, placement in the ESG Voucher program. Like so many others, her story – the bad part of it – began with domestic violence at the hands of her husband. “I gave up everything I had going on to get married”, she began. “I left it all behind so we could get married, be a family, start a family. I quit my job to stay home with the kids, the whole 9. We [Nelson and her oldest son] left everything to go be in this new life . . . that ended up not being anything that we thought it was going to be.”

Tatum and her children fled their home just three years into the marriage. “We slept on couches. Extra rooms – we slept random, wherever we could, and it was so hard with little kids in tow. All their stuff, my stuff – everything. We had nowhere to land.” Eventually, desperation led her back into the home with her husband. “It was the only way we were gonna be able to live even halfway comfortably, was moving back in with him. Unfortunately...well...that came with a lot of negativity. Among other things.” It didn’t take long before Tatum fled with her children again, this time for good. “We left literally everything behind. Everything. I am starting now from the bare bones bottom up.” Tatum landed in a one room space at a shelter for women with children fleeing domestic violence. Grateful for the safety and roof over their heads, living in the shelter didn’t come without its own struggles. “Your kids”, Tatum laughed, “your kids have to be within six feet of you the entire time you’re there [the shelter]. Do you know how hard that is to keep up? Shoot and especially with the older ones. They don’t want to be with you 24/7 – it was tough. I’m glad we weren’t on the streets, of course, but living with your kids in one room, with 30 other people in the common area, it was hard. Hard to get your mind right, for both me and the kids.”



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Tatum and her 3 children spent right at a year in the shelter, when she started working with Nathan Pate and Danny Fugate of the Homeless and Housing Coalition of Kentucky (HHCK) on finding a way to help her get housed outside of the shelter. Danny suggested an [ESG Voucher](#) – Tatum was eligible for it because it would keep her unified with her children, and expedite her location from a crowded shelter to a home. “It was crazy how fast the transition was,” she recalled. “I expected it was gonna take months, but Nathan and Danny – they were so great, worked really hard to find me a place, and then, right before Christmas – boom! We had a whole house!”

It is hard not to absorb some of the delight Tatum exudes when she talks about their new home. “Everyone has a bedroom – all of us. A bedroom that is your own, with a door to close if you want to.” Looking ahead excitedly to the birth of her 4th child, “I wouldn’t have a place to bring my new baby home to if I didn’t have this [ESG Voucher]. I can’t imagine how we would have managed at the shelter, the timing and all of this is like a dream come true. And my oldest, he is in therapy and opening back up – already this has been so incredible for him. And me, too, really. We’re both in therapy, we have a lot of healing to do together, and individually. Having this space that allows us to decompress and relax and just be. Just be. It helps as much as the therapy does. We have a house, and a back yard for them – everything we need. Oh! And the kids can walk to school, can you believe that?” Tatum went on to explain that the school district the children attend is right across the street from their new home. “It takes us under a minute to get there, and under a minute to get home”, she added, excitedly. “Right across the street.”

Tatum’s life is on the upswing in other ways, too. She’s working with the job readiness program at a local Goodwill to reinvigorate her job skills. “I hadn’t worked in almost 6 years. That’s a long time, and you forget how to do a lot of things, even just how to be part of a team at work. The lady who works there [Goodwill] in the mentorship program – she’s absolutely amazing. She’s even trying to work it out where I can work there a few hours a week when I can before the baby comes so I can have some money to help with my bills, stuff for the kids – that kind of thing. When I can go back to work full time, they’ll even help advocate for me getting a new job, once I have the baby and get everything taken care of. I just can’t believe it some days, how it’s all working out. And none of this positive change – none of it – would be possible if we were still in the shelter. This house and housing program are literally going to change all our lives.”