

MEMORANDUM

Date: May 3, 2021

To: Marisa A. Zapata, PhD
Director, PSU-HRAC

From: Lauren E. M. Everett
Graduate Research Assistant, PSU-HRAC

Subject: Updates on COVID-19 and disaster response, housing, and people experiencing homelessness nationwide, April 26 - May 2.

News¹

1. Washington became the first state in the nation to pass a civil [Right to Counsel](#), which provides free legal assistance to all low-income tenants facing eviction. The state joins several cities who have already implemented the policy, including [New York City](#) and [San Francisco](#). ([Business Insider](#))
2. Last week the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced it is withdrawing the Trump-era proposed modification that would have weakened the Equal Access Rule (EAR). The EAR ensures that all individuals have access to programs, shelters, and other services that are appropriate for their gender identity. ([HUD](#))
3. Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Emanuel Cleaver reintroduced the American Housing and Economic Mobility Act, which proposes to address the country's housing crisis through investments in the national Housing Trust Fund (HTF). It would allocate \$455 billion over ten years to build and preserve nearly 2 million deeply affordable homes, among other initiatives. ([NLIHC](#))
4. In a similar vein, last week Reps. Omar and Maloney introduced the Affordable Housing Preservation Act, which would fund the creation of community-owned and resident-run cooperatives for low-income households. ([Office of Ilhan Omar](#))
5. Controversy over the conversion of a suburban hotel to permanent housing for unhoused Austinites continues to unfold in the Austin area. Local officials in Williamson County filed a lawsuit alleging they were not aware of the purchase. ([KVUE Austin](#))
6. In Multnomah County (Portland, OR area), County Commissioners are debating different approaches to spending available funds to most effectively address unsheltered homelessness. ([Willamette Week](#))
7. In Oregon, administrators of state-allocated rental assistance in Multnomah County (Portland area) are moving slowly and strategically to ensure the funds reach households most in need. ([The Oregonian](#))

¹ New stories are gathered from national and international publications, and are not HRAC's original reporting.

8. In Houston judges heard 2,959 eviction cases during what was supposed to be a grace period to allow federal dollars to be distributed for paying back rent. Houston has one of the largest volumes of eviction filings in the nation, though advocates say the grace period appears to have made a small improvement. ([Houston Public Media](#))
9. Lawmakers in the Texas Legislature are considering bills that would ban encampments statewide. Austin voters will be voting on a similar bill, which would reinstate the city's previous camping ban and impose penalties for panhandling, sitting and lying in public areas. ([The Texas Tribune](#))
10. In Santa Barbara, CA Doctors Without Walls - Santa Barbara Street Medicine has been vaccinating the city's unhoused community with portable outdoor clinics and in congregate settings. So far they have reached almost 1,000 people. ([Santa Barbara Independent](#))

National HoUsed Campaign Call for Universal, Stable, and Affordable Housing (April 26):

Richard Cho, Senior Advisor for Housing & Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development: Secretary Fudge has spoken about this in numerous interviews, but for her, homelessness is a top priority. She is also aware that as many of us have access to COVID vaccines and had side effects from the second dose, she's thinking about how people who are experiencing homelessness can be comfortable while they're going through that same thing. There are more than half a million Americans--probably more--who are homeless and have to deal with COVID while unhoused. One thing HUD is doing is providing grants for communities to address homelessness. This includes adding affordable housing. The first funding stream was \$5 billion for the HOME initiative. We have some internal challenges that have to do with statute, and we're working on that. Then later this week we'll be issuing guidance on emergency housing vouchers, which is also \$5 billion, and will be awarded to public housing authorities across the country. They're intended for people currently experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, including people fleeing domestic violence.

Those two funding streams provide us an opportunity to do two things: provide support services and move people off of the street and out of shelters into permanent housing. This increase in voucher funding could impact 50 - 70,000 people. Then there's also the potential to create 32,000 new affordable homes with the HOMES funds. There are also some ESG funds left over from the CARES Act, which can provide short-term rental assistance while people are waiting for vouchers, or for people who just need some short-term help. We have the opportunity to get to a place where fewer people are in shelters or on the streets. This won't solve homelessness but it could make a significant dent.

Q: You say 50 - 70,000 could receive vouchers and 32,000 affordable homes could be created--is that correct?

A: Yes, and those are estimates but the idea is that HOME funds can be used to leverage other capital. But yes that's the minimum we're hoping for.

Q: When do you think communities will see those voucher funds, and what's the timeframe for seeing some guidance?

A: We announced the home funds a week ago but are resolving some legal aspects and hoping to get the guidance out soon. The vouchers will be available in early May, and housing authorities will hear about how much they'll receive at that time.

Q: How long will the voucher assistance run? (*Section 8 vouchers are for an indefinite period with no time limit)

A: They're kind of unusual in that the funding was provided in a lump sum rather than an ongoing, renewing source. We'll likely err on the side of providing more vouchers, which means that the timeline will end a little sooner, in 2027 or 2028. It is our administration's priority to scale assistance and make sure that every household that's eligible for assistance will get it?

Q: How will you make sure the vouchers go to those most in need?

A: I can't go into too much detail, but partnering with housing authorities and homeless organizations is our plan.

[HUD FAQ](#) on the housing provisions in the American Rescue Plan Act.

Rebecca Yae, Research Assistant, NLIHC & Jessi Russell, Research Assistant, Center for Law and Social Policy:

[Read the report](#)

Russell: Despite the prioritization requirements for emergency rental funds, the Treasury has not included details about how this would be achieved. Our report outlines ways that administrators can reach the statute's prioritization requirements while centering racial equity. Everyone who's behind on rent deserves rent relief full stop, just to be clear. At the same time prioritization is an essential component when funds are limited. The same people who are currently the most at risk of eviction have also been historically the most vulnerable to losing their housing. The report emphasizes the importance of disaggregating data by geography. The first section of the report outlines how to determine the priority population by using geographical data, centering racial equity, and partnering with community-based organizations.

Yae: Program administrators need to set goals and establish standards for accountability, and budget the funds to ensure ample administrative capacity. Washington's program intentionally prioritized BIPOC tenants in two ways: it held grantees accountable to specific performance metrics in that the amount of funding must be at least proportional to the percentage of that group's households in the county. They also mandated that the grantee set aside at least 5% to community sub-grantees that both serve and are run by the target populations. Another important aspect is conducting robust tenant and landlord outreach by partnering with and investing in community groups, leveraging existing tenant outreach programs, and doing non-digital outreach. Providing

ample intake support for tenants and landlords is also crucial. This includes reducing language and technology barriers to completing the application. The fifth finding is around selecting applications and providing services using equity-based strategies and vary the duration of assistance based on need. Some examples of the former are: points-based systems; shortlisted first-come, first-served; and a weighted lottery. Finally, monitoring and evaluation ensure that the programs meet their goals. This includes real-time evaluation of program progress while making corrections as needed.

Q: What is being used in a point system approach?

A: Step one is determining the priority population using contemporary data and historical analysis.

Neetu Nair, Research Analyst, NLIHC: We're continuing to track emergency rental assistance programs in our database. As of today our database includes nearly 900 ERA programs, including 260 programs that have received federal funding from the Treasury. The open programs are in 323 jurisdictions, including 41 state, 136 county, and 46 city programs. In terms of the initial observations we're seeing that self-attestation is low, with only 28% of programs accepting this kind of documentation. It's more common for income and COVID hardship than for housing instability. Only 17% of programs offer assistance directly to tenants, and some programs state that they will dismiss the application if the landlord does not respond.

Janne Huang, Outreach Campaign Strategies Manager, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: We've shifted our attention to making sure that the various stimulus checks are reaching people who need it most and are not receiving them for different reasons. Back in January the IRS shared that about 8 million people had not received either of their stimulus checks. We're focused on these folks, who may lack stable housing or be immigrants. One quick point I wanted to share is that people without social security numbers were not able to claim dependents for the first two checks. For this check, a SSN is not required to claim dependents. We're encouraging people to file taxes to claim their stimulus checks and also to take advantage of other tax credits, including the Advanced Child Credit. After May 17 through October 15 we're going to continue encouraging people to file taxes because there's no penalty if you don't owe anything. We have several resources available for outreach. The key messages are: 1. You might be eligible for three checks worth up to \$3,200; 2. There are other tax credits available through filing taxes; 3. If *anyone* in your household has a SSN file taxes by May 17 to get your money; and 4. This will not have immigration-related consequences under the Public Charge rule. We have a ton of FAQs and other resources on eligibility on our website. We're about to launch a new outreach toolkit that focuses on hard-to-reach populations.

Gregory Heller, ED, Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority: We launched our first rental assistance program in May 2020 and did three rounds of assistance before the federal appropriation. In the third round we distributed assistance directly to tenants because landlord participation was low. For our latest round we will make payments to the tenant if the landlord doesn't respond and we take self-attestation. Over 90% of our assistance recipients make under 50% AMI. The Urban Institute put out a great tool where you can see geographically where assistance should be targeted, and we've been using that to do more outreach in those neighborhoods including door-to-door and billboards.

Q: Do you get a certification from the tenant that the funds will only be used for rent?

A: We do have the tenant sign an affidavit that the funds will be used for housing costs.

Q: How many applications have you received?

A: A little over 17,200 in this latest round.

Sarah Coffey Bowes, ED, Civil Justice, Inc.: We just launched a new project called the Renter Eviction Avoidance Project where we're representing tenants in public housing. Currently about one third of households in our public housing are delinquent in rent, which is pretty alarming. We've tried to implement a multi-pronged approach to this issue. After we review the tenant's public housing file we then assign the case to one of our panel of attorneys, who receive a small stipend. We've also hired a community engagement and services coordinator who does the administrative work and assists tenants with their applications. We're at the start of our project now and are hoping to reach as many of those public housing households as possible.

Other resources:

1. The National Alliance to End Homelessness has released a new edition of their [*Voices from the Field*](#) survey and report, covering February and March of 2021.
2. A new tool from Local Housing Solutions and PolicyMap aggregates Census data to present a better understanding of [community housing needs](#).
3. The National Women's Law Center has released a number of documents analyzing the [economic impact of the pandemic on women](#).
4. The NLIHC and the National League of Cities have partnered on a guide entitled [How to Establish and Improve Emergency Rental Assistance Programs](#).