

EMERGENCY RENTAL ASSISTANCE: THE NEED FOR PERMANANT SUPPORT

Emergency rental assistance has been a vital lifeline for renters facing housing instability throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic recovery. During the pandemic, Congress provided more than \$46 billion in emergency rental assistance to help over 5.3 million households facing an unexpected loss of income - such as job loss during the pandemic - stay in their homes, covering overdue rent and utilities. In doing so, the pandemic program avoided a wave of evictions and saved lives.

More than 514 emergency rental assistance programs were created during the pandemic. These programs played a critical role in preventing homelessness by providing funds to help struggling renters afford their housing expenses and avoid eviction. Thanks to emergency rental assistance and other COVID-era policies, eviction filings fell by more than half between the start of the pandemic and the end of 2021. ERA funds were targeted to help those most at-risk of eviction, with 64% of recipients reporting extremely low incomes.

Today, nearly all emergency rental assistance programs have exhausted funds and closed their doors, despite clear and ongoing need. Nearly 73% of extremely low-income renter households are severely housing cost-burdened, spending over 50% of their income on housing. After paying rent, these households have little, if any, money remaining for other necessities, like nutritious food, medical care, or school supplies, and even less to put aside for savings. They are always one missed paycheck, cut in work hours, or unexpected expense away from falling behind on rent and facing eviction and, in worst cases, homelessness.

Black women face the greatest threat of losing their homes to eviction. Black women renters are twice as likely as white renters to have evictions filed against them. Families with children are also at particularly high risk of eviction. Evictions can harm families for years, pushing households deeper into poverty and significantly harming their mental and physical health, employment, and financial well-being.

Emergency rental assistance is a proven solution to help prevent evictions, maintain household stability, and ensure the economic well-being of both renters and landlords. The need for ongoing resources for ERA and other eviction diversion measures is increasingly evident.

Federal Solutions

To stabilize households in crisis and prevent evictions and homelessness, Congress must provide ongoing resources for emergency rental assistance and eviction diversion.

Eviction Crisis Act

Congress should enact the “Eviction Crisis Act” to permanently authorize a program to provide short-term emergency rental assistance to help renters avoid eviction and remain stably housed. The bill is led in the Senate by Senators Michael Bennet (D-CO), Todd Young (R-IN), and Sherrod Brown (D-OH), and the House companion, the “Stable Families Act,” is led by Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-NY).

Emergency rental assistance can help cover the gaps between income and rental costs during a financial crisis, stabilizing households before they face housing instability and require more extensive and expensive services. These resources can be used in conjunction with other housing stability services, such as housing counselors and legal aid, to significantly reduce evictions and homelessness. Stable housing, in turn, supports community stability, educational outcomes for children, and public health.

State and Local Solutions

To help renters stably housed, state and local governments should dedicate resources to provide emergency rental assistance.

State and Local Emergency Rental Assistance

State and local emergency rental assistance programs are funded by state and local resources and provide short-term payments to families experiencing a crisis. Many of these programs prioritize low-income and marginalized renters, including those with extremely low incomes, people with disabilities, seniors, or unhoused individuals. Programs either provide rental assistance directly to families in need or to landlords.

Needed Reforms

In addition to funding emergency rental assistance programs, federal, state, and local policymakers should:

- Work with courts to adopt policies and procedural safeguards, including ensuring tenants have knowledge about and access to available assistance and legal representation options, requiring judges to postpone eviction case hearing to give renters time to apply for and receive assistance, and barring landlords from evicting tenants while emergency rental assistance applications are pending.
- Provide a bridge to longer-term or intensive housing stability supports for households that have greater needs, such as a history of homelessness, chronic health conditions, or disabilities.
- Simplify applications to ensure renters can access emergency rental assistance easily.
- Allow emergency rental assistance to cover hotel and motel stays, rental security deposits, application or screening fees, reasonably accrued late fees, and internet service fees, especially for temporarily displaced and doubled-up households that are at high risk of losing their homes.
- Create “just cause” eviction protections to ensure greater housing stability and prevent arbitrary and harmful actions by landlords. In many places, landlords can evict tenants for no reason at all, putting renters at increased risk of housing instability.
- Establish and fund a right to counsel to help more renters stay in their homes and mitigate harm when eviction is unavoidable. The majority of landlords have access to legal counsel in eviction courts, but very few renters have that same protection.
- Seal and expunge eviction records after 3 years and expunge all eviction filings that occurred during the

pandemic.

- Regulate tenant and credit reporting agencies to prevent the use of inaccurate or biased information.
- Provide resources to community-based organizations, including those led by Black and Asian people, Native Americans, and Latinos, to provide outreach and housing navigation services to help marginalized renters apply for emergency rental assistance.
- Enact legislation to create and enforce an eviction moratorium after a major disaster to protect renters from unlawful eviction.

Did you know?

- Today, **ten million renter households are one crisis away from major economic hardship** that could quickly spiral out of control.
- **Most renters in poverty spend at least half of their incomes on housing**, leaving virtually no margin for an unexpected expense. Broken-down cars, unreimbursed medical bills, or temporary declines of income can quickly send these households down the spiral of housing instability, eviction, and even homelessness.
- **Limited public resources, coupled with the growing costs of housing, have led to a crisis of evictions, homelessness, institutionalization, and other types of housing instability**, particularly for people with extremely low incomes.
- **Eviction is not just a condition, but a cause, of poverty.** An eviction record makes it harder for a family to find decent housing in a safe neighborhood and it negatively impacts employment, as well as physical and mental health.
- **After major disasters, displaced survivors struggle to access FEMA assistance, leading to greater housing instability and often homelessness.** Because climate change is causing more deadly and devastating disasters, there will be an increased need for emergency rental assistance for survivors.

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