

EMERGENCY RENTAL ASSISTANCE CASE STUDY

Illinois Housing Development Authority's 2020 Emergency Rental Assistance Program

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Background

Before Congress passed the COVID relief package at the end of 2020, Illinois' 2020 emergency rental assistance program was notably the largest program in the country in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, distributing more than \$230.6 million in Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF), and the only state to fully disburse its funds by the December 30, 2020 deadline. Administered by the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA), the agency initially planned to distribute housing assistance evenly between rent and mortgage assistance. With demand for rental assistance exceeding that for mortgage assistance, however, funds were redistributed with 70% going towards emergency rental assistance. To ensure equitable distribution of assistance, the Illinois General Assembly mandated that 33% of total funds must serve households in "Disproportionately Impacted Areas" (DIAs), defined as low-income neighborhoods and Black and Latino communities that were hardest hit by COVID-19 infections and layoffs due to the pandemic. Through a robust partnership with 62 non-profit organizations, community groups, and housing counseling agencies across the state to assist with outreach and provide applicant intake support, the program substantially exceeded the mandate to use at least one-third of funds in DIAs.

Key Program Outcomes

Illinois' 2020 emergency rental assistance program provided \$230.6 million in assistance to 46,129 households between August and December 2020, offering a one-time \$5,000 grant to low-income households in its last iteration. Over 67% of approved applicants were from households who identified as either African American, American Indian, Asian, or Pacific Islander, and they received over \$155 million in assistance. African American households received the largest share (63%) of funding. By the end of 2020, the program funded all eligible and complete applications, distributing nearly twice as much rental assistance as the other top five largest statewide programs in the country.

Strategies to Success

The emergency rental assistance program was designed to distribute emergency funds quickly to the most vulnerable households. Unlike other programs run by IHDA, the nature and urgency of the emergency rental assistance program entailed a centralized, assembly-line model of processing applications in-house, while case management services and applicant support were provided by nonprofit community partners. Senior staff at IHDA made broad policy decisions – such as increasing documentation flexibility, designing a program around underserved groups, and building internal capacity and infrastructure – balancing federal regulations

QUICK PROGRAM FACTS

Program: Emergency Rental Assistance Program
Lead organization: Illinois Housing Development Authority
Total funds distributed in rental assistance: \$230.645 million
Households served: 46,129
Funding sources: CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds
Total funds distributed in "Disproportionately Impacted Areas" (DIAs): \$155 million

and state policies with the statewide need for rental assistance to design a streamlined application accessible to all.

Strategy 1: Developing streamlined workflows and building internal capacity.

IHDA made an early decision to run a centralized program with a consolidated application and processing system for the state. Program administrators leveraged their robust IT system to develop a virtual assembly-line processing system where staff were assigned specific tasks in the review process and each application followed a streamlined workflow. Complete applications were assigned a unique identifier number and sent to a third party to generate a list of randomized numbers that determined the order in which applications were reviewed; staff accessed this list, reviewed the documentation, and approved the application for funding before the accounting team processed ACH payments or issued checks. In addition to allocating a third of its staff to the program, IHDA hired and trained 80 temporary staff to increase processing speeds. In total, nearly 100 staff were grouped into "pods" or teams of 10 processors, including a supervisor, and worked together within the virtual platform, troubleshooting issues in real time

while sharing lessons and strategies. Team leads met at the end of every day to discuss issues and spot trends needing to be addressed; for example, when multiple applications indicated a common error, staff would reassess the structure of the application or make additions to the FAQs to clarify the issue. Temporary staff were trained prior to onboarding to convey the nature and urgency of the work and build internal cohesion. Designated personnel within IHDA provided continuous training through workshops and presentations to staff processing rental assistance applications, on common issues, updates to the policies and procedures, additions to their public-facing documents, and in rare cases, modifications to the application itself.

Strategy 2: Increasing documentation flexibility to lower administrative burdens.

Program administrators at IHDA designed a straightforward application that relied on self-attestation to reduce documentation burdens. The application required tenants to submit only basic information, including their name, address, and email, verification of COVID-19 impact through a checkbox, and income through self-attestation. Information about the lease and rent owed were requested from landlords. Limited documentation streamlined the workflow: on average, it took approximately 15 minutes for a full review of an application. The use of self-attestation saved thousands of hours in processing time and was critical to the program's ability to spend all its funding. Minimal documentation requirements also reduced room for application errors, leading to a higher rate of approvals: 77.2% of all rental assistance applications were approved and subsequently funded.

Strategy 3: Targeting outreach to reach the most vulnerable households.

IHDA developed a range of marketing tools to promote the program, including informational flyers, one-pagers, PSA videos, and social media posts across platforms. In addition, program administrators prioritized outreach to DIAs to meet goals mandated by the Illinois General Assembly and aid households at the greatest risk. IHDA disseminated key program information in multiple languages and formats, including conducting over a dozen interviews with Spanish speaking media, local television, internet and public radio, podcasts, and local newspapers. To emphasize the program's broad eligibility criteria, administrators conducted specific outreach to refugee and immigrant community groups: presentations and marketing material were shared with Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Department of Human Service's Illinois Welcoming Center, and other organizations. For instance, a Facebook Live session with the Mexican Consulate generated over 35,000 views after filming. Administrators also hosted multiple information sessions with elected officials and their staff and provided them materials to share with their constituents. IHDA's efforts resulted in over 79,267 unique applications; 67.3% of those approved were from DIA communities, exceeding State targets by 55%!

Strategy 4: Creating partnerships with community groups based on mutual support.

IHDA contracted with 62 local nonprofit organizations across the state to provide critical intake support for populations with technology and language barriers. The nonprofit partners were chosen to provide outreach support for the program, in part, because of their deep history in their communities. Program administrators assert that the core of their success stems from a clear division of roles that did not overburden their partners: where IHDA leveraged their tech support and built their internal capacity to handle the back-end processing, their nonprofit community partners filled in the gaps, fielding intake questions and addressing common concerns raised by applicants. To support their partners, IHDA conducted detailed trainings and convened informational meetings. To address question or concerns, a direct hotline was set-up specifically for partners to troubleshoot issues in real time. Regular communication between IHDA and their community partners helped inform tasks on both ends. For instance, when community partners flagged common misconceptions about eligibility criteria, IHDA administrators reprioritized messaging and issued revised and clearer guidance for partners to share with applicants. This feedback loop was critical to problem-solving in real time and ensuring that no applicant was discouraged from participating.

Strategy 5: Building flexibilities within program design.

Although the program ran on a centralized assembly-line model, the feedback loop and internal communication built into the processing gave administrators flexibility to make modifications and improvements to the application review process. For instance, when staff identified 11,000 applications missing only one piece of information, administrators created an opportunity for applicants to provide

updated documents within a 14-day window. Administrators predicted that applicants were likely expecting correspondence from the program and would respond to data requests quickly. Of those contacted, 9,000 applicants responded with corrections, of which 7,000 were approved for funding. This flexibility in the process helped the program provide critical assistance to additional households and spend down all their funds.

Next Steps

IHDA will carry forward several strategies into their 2021 Rental Payment Program including: self-attestation; robust outreach and active partnership with community organizations; assembly-line application processing; flexibility; inclusivity; and responsiveness to ongoing guidance and legislation. IHDA program administrators also acknowledge key challenges and areas for improvement: program administrators struggled to reach the Latino community, rural populations, and smaller jurisdictions. Based on the data gathered from the 2020 emergency rental assistance program, IHDA program administrators plan to expand marketing and outreach to these communities to increase their participation in the program. This strategy will include working more closely with organizations that are trusted in the Latino community, clearly stating that the program is available to undocumented households and starting outreach efforts sooner. Administrators also plan to determine the amount of assistance disbursed to each applicant based on case-by-case need rather than a fixed dollar amount for the next round of Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance funding.



For more information, visit:

<https://www.ihda.org/about-ihda/2020-coronavirus-relief-fund-programs>