EMERGENCY RENTAL ASSISTANCE CASE STUDY

Washington State Department of Commerce's Eviction Rent Assistance Program

Rebecca Yae and Neetu Nair

Background

The Eviction Rent Assistance Program (ERAP) was intentionally designed to provide equitable access to rental assistance for people disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Administered by the Office of Homeless Youth and the Office of Family and Adult Homelessness at the Washington State Department of Commerce, the program's latest iteration uses CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds and State funding to offer twelve months of emergency rental assistance to low-income households. The program disburses funding through a network of grantees and subgrantees across the 39 counties.

Key Program Outcomes

ERAP served 20,725 households between August 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020 through 30 grantee organizations and 55 subgrantee organizations. Approximately 63% of households served were households of color. Nearly 70% of households served had extremely low incomes. By the end of 2020, the program had spent down 90% of its initial CARES Act funding. The program has been extended until June 30, 2021 with an additional $43.5 million of state funds for rental assistance.

QUICK PROGRAM FACTS

Program: Eviction Rent Assistance Program
Lead organizations: Office of Homeless Youth and the Office of Family and Adult Homelessness at the Washington State Department of Commerce
Total funding: $153.3 million
Funding sources: CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds ($110 million); WA State Disaster Response Account Funds ($43.5 million)
Prioritized population: households of color and marginalized communities
Households served: 20,725

Strategies to Successfully Serving Households of Color and Marginalized Communities

ERAP administrators intentionally prioritized marginalized populations by recognizing that historical practices have created disproportionately low access to housing and relief services for Black people, Native and Indigenous communities, immigrants, people with disabilities, people with mental health and substance use vulnerabilities, people with limited English proficiency, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and others who may have difficulty accessing mainstream support. Program administrators recognized that, though a single program cannot sufficiently undo historical inequities, it can begin to address them. To advance racial equity in the program, state program administrators required grantees to subgrant at least five percent of their funds to community organizations, held grantees accountable to key performance metrics on households of color served, and adopted self-attestation as a way to decrease documentation requirements, a significant barrier to assistance.

Strategy 1: Partner with local jurisdictions and organizations led by and for marginalized communities.

The State worked with 30 grantees to administer the program locally. The program required grantees to invest at least 5% of their initial grant in partnerships with organizations led by what they call "By & For organizations." Their working definition is that these organizations are operated by and for the community they serve and that their primary missions and histories are serving a specific community. They must be culturally based and directed, as well as substantially controlled by individuals from the population they serve. At the core of their programs, the organizations embody the communities' central cultural values. These communities may include ethnic and racial minorities, immigrants and refugees, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, individuals with disabilities or who are deaf, and Native Americans. In most cases, this requirement meant the program grantees were contracting with organizations they had never contracted with before and fostering relationships in new ways. Depending on the subgrantee/subcontractor organizational capacity and relationships with the grantees, subgrantees'/subcontractors' roles ranged from outreach only to outreach, intake support, and providing rental assistance payments to landlords on tenants' behalf.

Requiring grantees to partner with organizations substantially bolstered their ability to serve marginalized communities: many grantees served high shares of households of color in aggregate and high shares of Black households.

Strategy 2: Include racial equity in performance measurements.

The program required that the percentage of households being served by the program be proportional to the populations of color living in poverty in each county, including people of color in aggregate and Black, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native populations. If grantees were not on track to meeting their benchmarks by the time they spent 50% of their funds, they were required to submit a plan to the State on how they would address the gap. Ultimately, two-thirds of grantees met at least three of the four benchmarks. Only three grantees failed to meet any of the benchmarks, and each of these grantees had pursued exemptions to contracting with organizations led by and for marginalized communities. Grantees struggled most with meeting their benchmarks to serve their American Indian/Alaska Native populations, followed by Hispanic/Latino populations. Compared to past homelessness prevention program data, however, the emergency rental assistance program served a substantially greater share of households of color, Black households, and Hispanic/Latino households.

Strategy 3: Design an inclusive program.

Jointly developed by the Office of Homeless Youth and the Office of Family and Adult Homelessness, the program encouraged grantees to provide trauma-informed care that establishes a supportive experience and affirms clients' expertise. For example, in their FAQ, the program elaborated that housing disruption, one of the program's prioritizing criteria, "will have [a] personal meaning for the people involved," provided several examples, and affirmed that "It's okay to believe what people tell you." The program also prioritized youth and young adults to address lasting impacts of intergenerational poverty. Ten percent of the state funds went towards targeted outreach, support, and assistance for young parents under 24 years and youths with current or prior experience with foster care or state care, mental health counselling, treatment for substance abuse, or the court systems. Lastly, state program administrators ensured that program documents and marketing materials provided by the state were translated into the 25 most common languages in the state. The State also required that grantees provide interpretation services to ensure effective communication with people who have limited English proficiency and provided guidance and language service resources for grantees if needed.

Strategy 4: Lower documentation burdens for tenants and administrative burdens for grantees and subgrantees.

Notably, ERAP required grantees to use self-certification for eligibility criteria such as income and rental arrears and did not mandate source documentation such as a lease or landlord ledger of missed payments. Furthermore, the program prohibited grantees from collecting evidence to substantiate the self-certification or adding additional criteria, including identification, Social Security numbers, birth certificates or medical documentation, to ensure program accessibility. The State also used a combination of self-attestation from tenants and agreements from landlords to document tenants' rental obligations. Overall, grantees reported that the forms the State provided were straightforward and easy to use and that providing attestation options rather than collecting and reviewing documents helped speed up the process. The program also heard overwhelmingly that landlords were willing to participate and that they responded well to the simple process of attesting to tenants' rental arrears; in King County, the landlord refusal rate was only two percent. Lastly, state program administrators demonstrated leadership in supporting its grantees by working with them to make exceptions or waivers for special circumstances.

Next Steps

Successful strategies the program would like to continue in some form going forward include the ability to use self-attestation (as allowed); contracting with organizations led by and for marginalized communities; racial equity performance measures; and flexibility and responsiveness to emerging issues in the program. State program administrators also encountered several challenges in their programs that they seek to address. State administrators struggled with collecting and compiling program data from across its grantees and subgrantees. Grantees and subgrantees reported that funding provided for administrative costs was insufficient for the nature of the outreach and intake support they provided. Grantees and subgrantees also indicated that funding and capacity was inadequate to meet the overwhelming demand for emergency rental assistance. Additionally, subgrantees also requested additional training and support in administering funds and meeting equity targets. State administrators are currently updating the ERAP to incorporate lessons learned and feedback from grantees and subgrantees, and to better fit new guidelines for the Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance program. The State is looking to improve training, processes, forms, invoicing, and documentation to help streamline the work and to increase communication within the network. They seek to monitor grantees against performance measures earlier in the process and have more regular communication about their progress and about strategies they can implement to reach their targets. They have been conducting weekly grantee meetings to address some of these challenges early on.

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For more information, visit:
https://www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/homelessness/cares-act-and-state-rent-assistance/

1000 Vermont Avenue, NW | Suite 500 | Washington, DC 20005 | 202-662-1530 | www.nlihc.org

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