*COVID-19 Housing Stability Task Force*
*Access to Justice Working Group*
**Single-Centralized Web-based Resource for Renters Assistance Proposal**

Prior to the COVID-19 health and economic crisis, an estimated 518,000 families were financially insecure and at a higher risk of missed payments and eviction[1]. The Kinder Institute recently conducted and released an analysis[2] documenting how evictions place an "immense burden on the public and nonprofit sector," adding more than $315 Million in added public costs incurred by local shelters, medical providers, child welfare services and criminal justice agencies every year. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified the risk of housing displacement for financially insecure families and has left families who had previously been able to afford stable housing struggling to meet their monthly expenses. It is yet to be seen what strain this crisis will bring to local service providers.

In a series of ten focus groups for both landlords and tenants conducted by Connective[3] in late July, participants acknowledge the challenge to access and navigate information, resources and social services to ensure their housing stability.

- Landlords see the benefit of sharing as much information and resources as possible with their tenants but do not know where to refer tenants to in most cases.
- Tenants do not know what type of resources to ask for, how to find them, when to request them and how to access them. Many tenants fear sharing their financial struggles with their landlord.

Local government and direct service providers are ramping up their capacity to address these increasing needs with the few financial resources available, but too often these services are offered to households at imminent threat of eviction, when it is too late to negotiate an agreement or reach a favorable resolution between tenant and landlord. This lack of information and communication leads to unnecessary eviction filings, overwhelmed service providers, and a higher volume of tenants reaching housing insecurity.

Both landlords and tenant advocates agree that tenants, landlords and service providers would benefit from a centralized public education resource. **A public education web-based resource would increase access to information for all parties involved in the housing stability cycle, and assist tenants that face a potential eviction.**

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[1] https://www.urban.org/research/publication/houston-cost-eviction-and-unpaid-bills-financially-insecure-families-city-budgets-2019
[2] https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/2020/09/16/evictions-cost-harris-county-over-315-million-each-year-housing-crisis-COVID-19
[3] https://www.connectivetx.org/

| Single-Centralized Web-based Resource for Renters Assistance Proposal | |
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| **Project Brief** | Centralized/Single web-based resource for all renter assistance information. This unified system would include critical components that allow users easy access to information and learn about assistance to address a potential eviction. This platform would at minimum be a bilingual resource (English/Spanish) with more languages added after completion.<br><br>End Users: cost-burdened tenants and their landlords; this portal would also support service providers in their educational activities with renters and landlords.<br><br>The web-based resource aims to support tenants through multiple scenarios. Our hope that this web-resource allows the self-help material to be downloadable in a printable format and distributed through the partnerships built in the process to address digital divide concerns. |
| **Project Goals** | • Inform local residents about tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities<br>• Reach at risk tenants before they receive a notice to vacate or the official legal eviction process starts<br>• Connect tenants facing eviction with the legal and financial resources to assist them<br>• Provide self-help tools to residents at different stages |
| **Proposed Project Process** | The project activities would be implemented in three distinct phases:<br>    • Phase 1: Build a website with critical information for tenants and self-help resources. Phase 1 would include limited referral resources.<br><br>    • Phase 2: Build interactive tools in the website to provide high quality referral information which optimizes the likelihood that the tenants are referred to organizations that have the resources immediately available to assist them.<br><br>    • Phase 3: Development of a centralized portal to support direct referrals to local direct assistance organizations<br><br>    • At the conclusion of Phase 3 when the website and portal are ongoing and active, a permanent host would adopt the web portal, and take on long-term maintenance and update needs. |
| **Proposed Project Activities** | 1. Seek a product manager who can do the following:<br>    • Interview experts on the tenant experience and eviction processes;<br>    • Based off of interviews develop content for the website, including branching logic for tenants at different stages of the eviction process |

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| | <ul><li>Hold focus groups with tenants at risk of eviction and hold meetings with experts to refine and finalize website content</li><li>Work with the web designer to provide feedback on and finalize website layout and components</li></ul>2. Seek a web designer who can follow a process to:<ul><li>Outline the plugins and dependencies necessary for the project</li><li>Create a mockup of the website layout and components</li><li>Implement the design in WordPress</li><li>Load content provided by Product Manager into the website</li><li>Train the host organization on how to use the software and keep the website updated</li></ul>3. Develop a website that can help tenants find information about rental housing and the eviction process. The website should have the following features:<ul><li>Mobile first design: this strategy aims to create a better experience by initiating the design process focused on smartphone navigation; this ensures that the user experience works on any device with a bigger screen</li><li>ADA compliant features (captions and alternate text)</li><li>WordPress preferred, to ease updates in the future</li><li>A Home page that orients the user to the purpose of the site and provides clear next steps for engagement</li><li>Workflow that walks the user through a questionnaire to determine what resources they need<ul><li>i. Preferably store these results in the WP database and make available for export</li></ul></li><li>Well-designed individual pages for each of the website sections</li><li>Easy for host organization to update</li></ul> |

- **Below is an outline of the proposed content for a web-resource by phase and scenario, listed in order of development priority.**

| Housing Cycle Tenant Needs or Possible Scenarios | Phase 1 | Phase 2 | Phase 3 |
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| | **Content** | **Content** | **Content** |
| **Are worried about being able to pay rent** | • Overview of Tenant-Landlord Law in Texas, written and in video of a legal aid lawyer with Q/A Section<br><br>• Tips for how to talk with your landlord, preparing for that conversation, video from the landlord with their recommendations, Q&A Section, sample documents for written agreements (including a payment plan).<br><br>• Possible referral to a Tenant-Landlord Facilitation Pilot (TBD.)<br><br>*Referral Information: 2-1-1 (for broad overview of available help), and participating organizations* | • Interactive pre-screening tool (with a set of questions) to direct user to direct service providers that align with their current needs. Collaborate with: MAM, ECHOS, LISC FOC network, and others. | • Centralized Intake Web-Portal with up to 10 participating organizations<br>• Intake system will include chat feature. |
| **Have received a notice to vacate** | • Overview of the Eviction Process in Texas (written and video), Q&A section, pro se documents, pros and cons of self-representation.<br><br>*Referral information to Local Legal Aid Organizations, which include: LSL, HVL, TRLA, DRC (in certain situations).* The website will outline the different eligibility criteria for | • Interactive pre-screening tool (with a set of questions) to direct user to the Local Legal Aid Organizations.<br>• Work with LSL on their integrated intake eviction referral system. We would use the process and tools they come up with. | |

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| | each potential referral to ease navigation for the tenant. | | |
| **Have a legal action filed against them** | • Overview of the Eviction Process in Texas (written and video), preparing for court date. Link to LSL interactive function on their website, pro se documents, pros and cons of self-representation<br><br>*Referral information to LSL, HVL, TRLA* | • Interactive pre-screening tool (with a set of questions) to direct user to the Local Legal Aid Organizations.<br>• Work with LSL on their integrated intake eviction referral system. We would use the process and tools they come up with.<br>• Map of organizations that can provide access to the internet and technology to attend virtual court dates. | |
| **Have an eviction court date set** | • Overview of the Eviction Process in Texas (written and video), preparing for court date. Link to LSL interactive function on their website, pro se documents, pro and cons of self-representation<br><br>*Referral information to LSL. HVL, TRLA, Rehousing Assistance\**<br><br>\*To prepare for a potential transition. | • Interactive pre-screening tool (with a set of questions) to direct user to the Local Legal Aid Organizations.<br>• Work with LSL on their integrated intake eviction referral system. We would use the process and tools they come up with. | |
| **Have been forcibly removed/locked out from unit** | • Overview of Tenants Rights in Texas, with Q/A feature.<br>• Overview of illegal eviction procedures in Texas.<br><br>*Referral information to LSL, HVL, TRLA* | • Work with Legal Aid to take legal actions against illegal eviction procedures. | |

| Have been evicted | • Overview of Re-Housing Options, with video<br><br>• Map how to find affordable housing based on your budget, and where to access housing navigation supports<br>• Overview of available housing programs, housing subsidies, and eligibility.<br><br>*Referral information to: Homeless Coalition, Housing Counseling Agencies, City of Houston Housing Community Development Department, Harris County Community Development Services Department* | •    Work with Coalition for the Homeless – they are trying to identify low cost properties that have space.<br>•    Interactive pre-screening tool (with a set of questions) to direct user to Re-Housing Assistance resources. | |
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| **Are thinking about renting** | • What to look for in a lease agreement, video of a housing counselor (video content approved by legal aid partners), Q&A section<br><br>• Income/expense calculator that could help identify a sustainable rental amount<br><br>• Learn about the rental property before signing a lease tool (3-1-1 complaints, etc) | • Interactive pre-screening tool (with a set of questions) to direct user to the Local Housing Counseling Agencies and other options. (example: https://www.1degree.org/)<br><br>• Map (zip code level) that show:<br>  o  Average rental cost per unit by housing type and number of bedrooms.<br>  o  Amenities available in local neighborhoods. | |

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| | *Referral Information: Local Housing Counseling agencies* | • For tenants with children, compare schools in different locations and identify child care options |
| **Is living in a unit in need of repairs or inspection** | • HUD Eight Healthy Homes Principles & Fair Housing Resources<br><br>• What are your rights and responsibilities as a renter in Texas with Q/A feature<br><br>• -How to guide- for requesting repairs/maintenance from your landlord.<br><br>• How to Report Issues to Building Code Enforcement | • Interactive pre-screening tool (with a set of questions) to direct user to the Local Legal Aid Organizations in reference to repairs, or inhabitable situation. |