

## **Harris County & City of Houston | COVID-19 Housing Stability Task Force**

### **Virtual Kick-Off Meeting Notes**

**Date: 07.17.2020**

**Time: 11am - 1pm**

#### **Meeting Goals:**

- Beginning to get to know one another
- Setting initial parameters about what the group is (and is not) going to tackle
- Developing a common understanding of recent data on evictions in our community and the legal process by which they occur
- Outlining activities for the next 60 days
- Generating enthusiasm for future meetings and the work ahead

### **Decisions**

- The task force will require a supermajority of  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the Task Force participants to approve of any proposal. Dissenting opinions will also be provided when forwarding recommendations to the Recovery Czars.
- While the Task Force is not directly tackling long term affordable housing, the intent is that the Task Force policy and programmatic recommendations will lay ground for a long term set of strategies that address some of these issues.
- Four working groups/streams of work established
  - Policy recommendations working group, which would start with the Grace Period Ordinance.
  - Rental assistance recommendations working group. This working group will look at how to best render any future direct assistance.
  - Provide recommendations on the Access to Justice proposal.
  - Evaluate and expand Judge Brown's Eviction prevention pilot program.
- Task Force will meet every two weeks, next meeting Friday July 31st, 11am -1pm

### **Next Steps & To-do's before next meeting**

- Complete the Evaluation Survey before Friday July 24th.
- Reach out to one or two fellow Task Force members to get to know each other and build relationships amongst ourselves before our next meeting.
- In respect to our focus on Equity, Steven shared we will work to intentionally include diverse voices in the presentations and Task Force activities.

### **Suggestions/Recommendations/Questions**

- Task Force members would like quick action on the grace period ordinance given the immediacy of when the City is taking up the issue
- Participants have a desire to humanize these presentations and bring the tenant perspective
- Want to make sure workgroups don't become silos and that there is a connecting infrastructure to make sure all the proposals fit together
- How do we appropriately balance the need for short terms answers to immediate problems and the long term structural and systemic work that needs to be done

- Can we add a geographic dimension by census tract or zip code to our data visualizations?
- Is there a federal lobby connected on this team?
- Will we have a communication plan to capture "stories" of renters facing eviction? Will our communications plan include social media and advocacy?
- Judge Brown brought an example of the limits of JP's to enforce city law, even if the City enacts a Grace Period Ordinance. He suggested that working groups look at best practices, the legal parameters of a proposal, the obstacles it might face and produce robust recommendations for the City and the County.

### Requests for assistance

- January Advisors started at the neighborhood level considering it a sufficiently private level of geography, but would appreciate the expertise of this task force in discussing the ethical considerations of drilling down into smaller geographies. How do we share these types of data without causing unintentional harm. Also looking for creative ways to present the data to make it more real for participants
- Lone Star Legal Aid has opened a right to counsel pilot program and would like help/advice on how to scale the program

### Resources shared

- If you want to explore what multifamily properties are covered across Texas we've collaborated with TRLA and BASTA!
  - <https://trla.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Nearby/index.html?appid=1932f764d9254e9ebc28258d74cc8cbb>
- Q&A guidance on Section 4024 of the CARES Act: [https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/CPD/documents/CDBG\\_Eviction\\_Moratorium\\_QAs\\_2020\\_05\\_18\\_FINAL.pdf?utm\\_source=HUD+Exchange+Mailing+List&utm\\_campaign=8d05937a64-CDBG-Eviction-Moratorium-Q%26A\\_5%2F22%2F2020&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_f32b935a5f-8d05937a64-195](https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/CPD/documents/CDBG_Eviction_Moratorium_QAs_2020_05_18_FINAL.pdf?utm_source=HUD+Exchange+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=8d05937a64-CDBG-Eviction-Moratorium-Q%26A_5%2F22%2F2020&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f32b935a5f-8d05937a64-195)
- HUD COVID-19 FAQs for Public Housing Agencies: [https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/COVID19\\_Round3-FAQs\\_04-22-20.pdf](https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/COVID19_Round3-FAQs_04-22-20.pdf)
- Eviction Lab - Tracking dashboard: <https://evictionlab.org/eviction-tracking/houston-tx/>
- January Advisor's Harris County Eviction Dashboard: <https://www.januaryadvisors.com/evictions/>
- Proposed RELIEF Act to Keep Americans in their Homes Throughout COVID-19 Pandemic: <https://www.harris.senate.gov/news/press-releases/harris-announces-relief-act-to-keep-americans-in-their-homes-throughout-covid-19-pandemic>
- HEROES ACT: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6800>

### Welcome Remarks

- Harris County and City of Houston Recovery Czars welcomed and thanked the group for their participation.

- Armando Walle, Harris County Recovery Czar, reinforced the need to respond decisively in solving the looming eviction crisis we face. Armando acknowledged that locally many have been working in housing issues for a long time. He looks forward to the recommendations from the Task Force and expects to have robust conversations with the group. Requested that Task Force members speak up, to share opinions both from their heart and their expert perspective.
- Marvin Odum, City of Houston Recovery Czar, acknowledged the scale of this economic crisis, and how difficult it is to understand the magnitude of what might happen. “A lot of times people ask what keeps you up at night? It can be many things, but one of those is the knock-on effects of unemployment and housing instability and what it is going to mean for our community in a broader sense”.

He recognized the importance of this Task Force, and that it presents the opportunity to address this 360 degree issue and look at it from all angles. He emphasized that the size of this crisis is bigger than the resources available to completely address it. Odum is looking for this Task Force to propose near term actions to execute on with those resources that exist, as well as a better road map for where we go in the mid-term and beyond that as more resources become available. For example, what a second federal appropriation might mean for this space in particular?

- Task Force Co-Chairs welcomed the group and thanked Recovery Czars and LISC Houston.
  - Jeremy Brown, Justice of the Peace, shared that from his perspective as a JP he thinks the cases that he is handling currently at his court are from residents unable to pay rent due to COVID-19 related issues, for example: job loss, reduced work hours, or are sick. As a Judge, he has to follow State Law and State Law which does not allow him to use self defenses to keep households in their home. He is glad to be part of this broader community with the Task Force to figure out better systems to keep households out of his courthouse and in their home.
  - Ric Campo, looks forward to working with the group in this complicated but important task. Ric noted how critical it is to have a partnership with both the City and the County, and applaud that both commissioners court and city council allowed us to do this. He shared that he has been involved in affordable housing issues for over 25 years and the challenge we have today is how COVID-19 has exasperated problems that already existed. “We had housing insecurity, a lack of affordable housing and homelessness already. We need to tackle this issue from the COVID perspective, not from the broad homelessness issue and the broad affordable housing issue.” He thinks this is the first time that a group this diverse and with this much expertise sits down together to try and deal with this issue, and he appreciates the commitment.

<b>Meeting Introduction</b>
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- Steven Dow, with LISC Houston thanked the Recovery Czars, and Co-Chairs. Steven shared a personal story about what brings him to this Housing Stability Task Force related to a homeless transition program from HUD that used foreclosed homes in North Tulsa, and the systems failures involved when a family gets evicted.

Steven framed the current economic and rental housing crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and acknowledge the following:

- We are facing this crisis during a long overdue national and local reckoning around structural issues of race and equity.
- We know the impacts of this health, economic and housing crisis disproportionately affect communities and people of color.
- While we all know that a massive infusion of dollars from Washington would solve this problem, we don't think that it is likely to happen.
- We fear how this crisis will play out in the months ahead.
- We have assembled ourselves at this table to address this issue head on with the aspiration of writing a different end to our story. We declared our aspirations that we do not want people to lose their housing due to the economic circumstances that have been brought about because of the virus.
- We will have to take steps individually and collectively to achieve that outcome for our community.
- As a community we have tremendous assets to build upon: responding to disasters, experiencing housing veterans and building a national model to deal with the needs of the chronically homeless.
- We have city and county leadership that have both raised this as one critical and important issue; and asked us to make recommendations to them as to what we think needs to be done.
- We know we have difficult conversations ahead of us and difficult decisions to be made.
- We are committing to learn from our mistakes, to be better individually and collectively and to hold ourselves accountable to one another.
- We at LISC Houston will do our best to support this Task Force.
- Steven thanked the members, the co-chairs and the City and the County and their staff for coming together to address this rental housing crisis.

### **Small Groups Discussions**

Elaine Morales, of Houston LISC thanked members for participating in the interviews, and shared that many members mentioned they did not know all other members. Houston LISC will plan to spend a portion of each meeting in the next couple of months on small group sessions to provide the space for members to get to know each other and build stronger relationships.

The Task Force was divided into smaller group discussions facilitated by Houston LISC team members. Small Groups went through the following prompts:

- Describe a personal experience that has led you to want to work on the Housing Stabilization Task Force
- What surprised you about the answers your fellow task members provided in the interviews?
- What pain points are your organizations experiencing because of COVID?

### **Presentation Notes**

- What does the eviction process currently look like? | Presenters: Howard Bookstaff, Dana Karni
  - The current eviction process is currently influenced by the CARES Act.
    - State-wide and Local special court rules.
    - Specific regulations and process for CARES Act protected properties.
  - The eviction process for Non-CARES Act properties continues independently.
  - Powerpoint presentation was shared with attendees in follow-up email.
  
- Background on evictions in Harris County | Presenter: Jeff Reichman
  - The purpose of the presentation was to better understand the size of the problem in Harris County and to discuss what the Task Force will need to do to track this appropriately to be able to address it through policy and funding allocation to keep people housed.
  - Presentation highlights included:
    - A look at 20 years of eviction data indicates the eviction issue is large and growing.
    - Harris County saw an increase in Evictions since 2016. While Houston's Real Estate market keeps growing, in 2019 there were 64,000 eviction cases filed due to rising rents with over 35,000 evictions. This number does not tell the full size of the problem because notices to vacate are not tracked.
    - Harris County is second only to New York City when looked at the number of households under threat or experiencing eviction.
    - The eviction issue will be exacerbated with COVID potentially creating an enormous stress to social services safety nets.
    - The Task Force should decide on what data it will be collecting, how to do it ethically and how to use it to inform policies and the work.
  - The PowerPoint presentation was shared with attendees in a follow-up email.