



COVID1-9 Harris County Housing Stability Task Force
Proposed Recommendations for local implementation of the
COVID Recovery and Relief Fund - Supplemental Appropriation for 2021.

January 15, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented number of families facing economic hardship. The increasing needs of households across the country required swift and timely assistance that could be delivered expeditiously and equitably to those in need. Harris County and the City of Houston have provided local tenants with more than \$150M in CARES ACT rent and direct assistance to date. These funds were managed and distributed by BakerRipley and Catholic Charities of Houston and Galveston in collaboration with Connective. Connective has brought a user-centered focus and technology tools to this partnership that has sustained housing stability for thousands of families across the County.

As we begin the year facing an increase in COVID-19 cases, past due rent and high unemployment rates; the US Congress approved the COVID Recovery and Relief Fund -Supplemental Appropriation for 2021 which includes \$25B of emergency rental assistance. The COVID-19 Harris County Housing Stability Task Force has reviewed this program and makes the following recommendations on the local implementation of its allocation. Our recommendations below focus on those that are applicable to our current landscape and we acknowledge that local government entities will follow federal guidelines on this legislation.

1. **Align City & County Rent, Utility and Direct Assistance Programs.** The Task Force recommends a combined, unified, and coordinated City of Houston and Harris County Rental & Direct Assistance Programs that enhances seamless access to needed financial resources. This will avoid unnecessary confusion for landlords, tenants, community stakeholders and media.
 - Such alignment should include clear message and communication through one entry point, simple eligibility requirements, determination of target population, and considerations on funding limits and the amount of assistance.
 - We applaud the City and Counties' efforts at coordination on their rental assistance programs administered by BakerRipley and the emergency direct assistance programs administered by Catholic Charities and BakerRipley. We'd like to continue to see early coordination that helps administrators simplify and demystify programs and processes for residents.
2. **Eligibility:** Eligibility requirements have proved to be one, if not the biggest, barrier of rent assistance programs. The Task Force recommends the simplification of eligibility requirements as much as possible, including the following:
 - **Allow for broader and faster use of self-certifications to proof income eligibility and COVID-19 impact.**
 - **Allow for evidence of public benefit participation as proof of income eligibility.** When proof of public benefit participation was included in the direct and rent assistance programs in the fall of 2020, the percent of applicants who chose this option as proof of eligibility ranged from 57%-81%, a substantial majority.
 - **Eligibility for all programs should be accessible to households regardless of immigration status.** If there are any legal restrictions on who can be served by direct assistance funds, in the case of tenant's whose landlords do not participate in the Rental Assistance program, adopt

policies allowing for mixed status households, including households with children with legal status, to apply; or raise local government or private funds to serve these clients.

- **Both landlords and tenants should be allowed to apply directly for assistance independent of each other.** In the case that a tenant applies without landlord application, the assistance would go to the tenant as direct assistance.

3. **Amount and length of assistance:** The Task Force supports using these funds to cover all rent arrears back to March 2020 and at minimum one month of future rent, with considerations for additional months of future rent.

4. **Application Process:** We support investments to make programs ACCESSIBLE to residents, leveraging best practices from previous disasters and disaster funds. Priority investments should focus on Access & Outreach and include:

- Use of a single application portal that includes both City and County programs that is mobile, user friendly, with low documentation burden, and that communicates clear expectations about the process
- Set aside funds and human resources for multilingual assistance in navigating and completing the application, given gaps in technology access
- Partner with community-based organizations (such as nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, faith-based institutions, etc) to conduct outreach to vulnerable communities

The Harris County Housing Stability Task Force is available to work with City and County Officials and Departments to support them in their efforts to align rent and direct assistance programming for our community. Below we have included a chart with additional considerations.

| COVID Recovery and Relief Act: Supplemental Appropriations 2021 | Housing Stability Task Force Recommendation |
|---|--|
| \$25b allocated for Rent Assistance (\$60M for COH, \$75M for HC) Limited to 10% for non-direct financial assistance | Use the 10% to cover administration, case management, pilot programs, legal services and housing counseling. Consider raising private funds to cover additional gaps |
| 12 months back rent | Use funds to cover back to March 2020 |
| 3 months forward rent Re-eligible for additional 3 months | Cover a MINIMUM of one month of future rent. Allow assisted tenants to be re-eligible for allowable additional months (when back rent is fully paid) |
| Families that experienced a reduction in household income, and/or experienced financial hardship due to COVID-19, or can demonstrate housing instability. | Allow for Self attestation and for proof of public benefits as eligible proof of income. |

Respectfully submitted,



Judge Jeremy Brown, Co-chair



Ric Campo, Co-chair

COVID-19 Harris County Housing Stability Task Force Members List

Claudia Aguirre, BakerRipley

Howard Bookstaff, Hoover Slovack LLP

John Boriack, Veritas Equity Management

Cynthia Colbert, Catholic Charities

Curtis Davis, Houston Housing Collaborative

Guadalupe Fernandez, Tahirih Justice Center

Marcia Johnson, Thurgood Marshall School of Law

Courtney Johnson, George E Johnson Properties

Dana Karni, Lone Star Legal Aid

Mary Lawler, AVENUE

Jay Malone, Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation

Zoe Middleton, Texas Housers

Margaret Oser, United Way of Greater Houston

Chrishelle Palay, HOME Coalition

Celeste Peterson, Texas Organizing Project

Ana Raush, Coalition for the Homeless

Jeff Reichman, January Advisors

Mark Thiele, Houston Housing Authority

Maria Verdeja, Harris County CSD

Alan Watkins, Wells Fargo

Diana Zarzuelo, Greater Houston Community Foundation

Houston LISC, Backbone Agency