



MAY 2020 | FACT SHEET

Improving Housing Assistance in Response to COVID-19

The spread of COVID-19 has unleashed a health and economic crisis of unprecedented scope. This disaster has highlighted the housing insecurity that many individuals and families were already experiencing, the heightened risk from the novel coronavirus faced by people experiencing homelessness, and the need to quickly deliver housing relief in responding to this public health crisis. Women and families across the nation need policymakers to focus **both** on immediate housing assistance for people experiencing homelessness and renters and structural fixes to address underlying reasons for our nation's persistent housing crisis.

Housing Needs Are Acute Across the Nation

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, millions of people across the country struggled to afford housing. In order to afford to rent a modest, two-bedroom apartment in the United States, a full-time worker needs to earn [\\$22.96 per hour](#) (the 2019 national Housing Wage). Because women, and particularly women of color, are overrepresented in the low-paid workforce, many women and families already struggled to afford rent. Thus far, [about 36.5 million people](#) have filed for unemployment, which underestimates job losses because [millions more](#) could not get through the process. With the loss of their paychecks, women and families will struggle to pay their rent and mortgages – facing the risk of eviction or foreclosure.

Similarly, homelessness has been on the rise prior to the current pandemic. In 2018, [219,905](#) women, girls, transgender people, and gender non-conforming people experienced homelessness. These numbers can be expected to rise as COVID-19 spreads, especially for populations like survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and immigrant women and families who face higher rates of economic insecurity. People experiencing homelessness face a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 because they are more likely to have chronic health conditions, often have limited access to running water for handwashing and health care, and may live in congregated communities such as encampments or shelters that make it impossible to self-quarantine. [Researchers project](#) that people experiencing homelessness will “be twice as likely to be hospitalized, two to four times as likely to require critical care, and two to three times as likely to die than the general population.”

Homelessness and Rental Assistance Desperately Need Improvement

The McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Grants (HAGs), composed of the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program and the Continuum of Care (CoC) program, provides the core federal funding to address homelessness. Congress modeled the ESG program on the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP), which responded to the 2008 recession. HPRP served [more than 1.3 million people](#) (58 percent of which were women, girls, and transgender people) over three years. About 90 percent of participants had permanent housing by the end of their assistance. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awards ESG and CoC funds to communities for street outreach, rapid re-housing, shelter ranging from emergency shelter to permanent supportive housing, and homelessness prevention. Unfortunately, current funding for HAGs is insufficient to meet the needs of this crisis.

- **Homelessness assistance has been dramatically under-resourced:** Federal funding has never been sufficient to end homelessness. In 2018, homelessness providers only had capacity to offer year-round temporary beds to [70 percent](#) of people experiencing homelessness.
- **Homeless shelters are ill-equipped to handle this or other health crises.** They are running out of sanitation and cleaning supplies, rarely have separate rooms for self-quarantining, and do not have enough staff and volunteers because of school and child care closings, cautions to stay at home, and caregiving responsibilities. Shelters lack testing capacity, and not all workers have been trained in how to identify symptoms of COVID-19.

Most rental assistance comes through three core HUD programs (public housing, Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, and Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance) and rural housing programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). These programs help millions of women and families have a roof over their head. In fact, women and girls are [63 percent](#) (5.92 million) of the 9.5 million served by HUD rental assistance programs, and female-headed households are [71 percent](#) of the nearly 400,000 households served by USDA's rural housing programs.

- **Rental assistance programs have inadequate funding:** For example, only [1 out of 4](#) eligible households receive HUD rental assistance.

- **Not all landlords** receiving housing assistance are equipped to maintain their properties during an economic crisis.

Ongoing Federal Investments Represent a Timely Down Payment on Overdue Structural Change

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provides a down payment on [some of the housing needs](#) amplified through the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **ESG funding:** The bill allocates \$4 billion in ESG funds. \$2 billion may be distributed within 30 days of enactment and the remainder within 90 days. ESG funds are meant to help prevent an outbreak of coronavirus among people experiencing homelessness and very low-income populations. They may also be used for eviction prevention assistance, temporary emergency shelters, staff costs, training, and hazard pay. The bill provides the HUD Secretary broad authority to waive or set alternative requirements for statutes and regulations, outside of those related to fair housing, nondiscrimination, labor standards, and the environment.
- **Moratorium on evictions and foreclosures:** The bill establishes a moratorium on foreclosures for federally backed mortgages: 60 days for single-family mortgages and a forbearance for up to 30 days for multi-family housing owners. Both types of homeowners may request a longer forbearance, [subject to certain conditions](#). The bill further establishes a 120-day moratorium on eviction filings related to non-payment of rent for renters in homes backed by a federally backed mortgage and a temporary moratorium on evictions for most residents of federally subsidized apartments.
- **Increasing Rental Assistance:** The bill allocates \$1.25 billion for tenant-based rental assistance, \$850 million of which can go toward administrative costs and other expenses to “support and maintain the health and safety of assisted households” and to support landlords participating in Section 8. The remainder is to cover increased renewal funding for public housing agencies (PHAs) facing higher voucher costs so they do not need to take rental assistance away from any families. The bill also allocates \$1 billion for project-based rental assistance and \$685 million for public housing to help maintain operations and take other necessary actions to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak.

- **Funding for At-Risk Populations:** In addition to the funding for people experiencing homelessness, the bill provides \$65 million for the Housing for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA) program to provide rental assistance, maintain operations, and for other COVID-19 preparation and response. It provides \$50 million for Section 202 Housing for the Elderly and \$15 million for Section 811 Housing for Persons with Disabilities.
- **Additional Funding for States, Localities, and Tribal Nations:** The bill provides \$5 billion in Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), some of which could be used to help people experiencing homelessness and to provide emergency rental assistance. It allocates \$300 million for Native American Housing Programs. The bill allocates \$45 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund and \$200 million for the Emergency Food and Shelter Program. Governors can request a major disaster declaration to seek FEMA approval for funds that can help address housing needs. The bill also creates a \$150 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund for state, tribal, territorial, and local governments to respond to COVID-19, including addressing housing needs.

More Significant Investments Are Needed Address Housing Needs in Light of COVID-19

- **More ESG funds:** Housing experts identified a need for [\\$15.5 billion in ESG funds to address local shelter needs](#) and house people experiencing homelessness in hotels and other spaces where they can isolate and self-quarantine. Congress should allocate \$11.5 billion in the next package to fill the gap remaining after the CARES Act. ESG funds should also be used to provide [medical respite care](#), outreach, and [street medicine](#) for people experiencing homelessness with limited access to traditional health care services. Funding is also needed for preventative measures like hand-washing stations at encampments.
- **Emergency rental assistance:** Congress should provide at least \$100 billion in emergency rental assistance to keep families in their homes and prevent mass evictions and increased homelessness in the future. Emergency rental assistance can also ensure that landlords are able to continue to operate the property.
- **Emergency funding for federally-assisted housing providers:** The CARES Act did not include any funding for USDA rural housing providers, and the resources provided for HUD housing providers, PHAs, and tribal housing authorities will likely be insufficient to meet the needs of residents as the crisis continues.
- **Uniform national eviction and foreclosure moratorium:** The moratorium in the CARES Act, along with state and local government moratoria, created a patchwork that is hard for people to navigate. Congress should enact a uniform moratorium on all evictions and foreclosures across the nation to assure every family that they will not lose their homes during this pandemic.
- **Suspend all HUD administrative rulemakings that harm access to housing:** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, HUD was working on several regulations that would limit access to already inadequate federal housing assistance and civil rights protections. Because changes to existing regulations could result in people losing stable housing and fair housing protections, as well as confusion among housing providers, HUD should suspend all non-emergency rulemaking for the length of the national emergency. HUD should focus solely on serving the needs of people experiencing homelessness to prevent large-scale outbreaks and providing rental assistance so more people do not experience homelessness.
- **Implement protections for tenants:** HUD has issued guidance and waivers for PHAs, owners of private voucher-assisted properties, and owners of subsidized multifamily properties, many of which are optional. HUD should implement uniform rules that protect tenants, such as requiring a simple, automatic process for reducing payments due to loss of income, establishing a \$0 minimum rent, providing a standard protocol to address emergency inspections and repairs, and more. Similarly, USDA should require a simple automatic process for adjusting rural tenants' rent payments and other actions to ensure residents can remain safely housed during the crisis.
- **Maximize existing and new sources of funding to meet urgent needs:** HUD should provide guidance and waivers to help all grantees access and utilize existing and new resources to meet the most pressing housing and homelessness needs of their communities.

Now Is the Time to Advance Structural Reforms to Solve Our Nation's Housing Crisis

Addressing our nation's housing crisis can help reduce risks for future pandemic outbreaks. The private sector cannot address the [shortage of 7 million affordable rental homes](#) for the lowest-income households on its own. In the coming weeks and months, Congress must:

- **Increase funding to the national Housing Trust Fund** to provide more resources to build and maintain rental housing that women and families with the lowest incomes can afford.
- **Drastically expand rental assistance:** Congress should fully fund Housing Choice Vouchers to eliminate the long wait lists for the 3 in 4 households who cannot access rental assistance. If Congress fails to provide enough vouchers to close this gap, targeted renters tax credits, preferably refundable tax credits for families, can help women and families with low incomes use more of their income for food, medicine, child care, and other basic needs.
- **Create a new, permanent emergency assistance fund** to prevent evictions resulting from future financial shocks.

Housing impacts every aspect of our lives. For too long, Congress and the administration have failed to enact policies that would put safe, affordable housing within reach for struggling women and families. The COVID-19 crisis should be a wake-up call to the need to immediately improve housing assistance and fix our nation's housing crisis.