



LITTLE ROCK (KATV) — Seven On Your Side is checking on the state's rent relief program following complaints submitted by a few landlords. Most of the complaints we receive typically involve tenants, but we have received a few complaints from landlords who claim tenants are not using the money to pay the rent they owe.

7OYS spoke with the Arkansas Department of Human Services spokeswoman, Amy Webb, to discuss the current investigations related to this issue. DHS is running the Arkansas Rent Relief program.

“We did make a change at some point during the program where after 10 days if the landlord didn't respond, to the three emails that we have sent and the phone calls that we have made to them, and we couldn't find them anywhere else in the system showing that they had applied separately, then we would pay the tenant directly,” Webb said.

Since the Arkansas Rent Relief program began last May, Webb said they have disbursed around \$61 million in rent and utility aid.

“We have not had a ton of cases where people said my tenant got paid and they didn't pay me, but when we do that goes into our investigative file for fraud,” she added.

Webb confirmed they're currently investigating 71 Arkansans for potential fraud, but that's out of the 56,000 applications filed.

“We do everything we can to get the landlord to participate because we don't want to have that issue - we want to pay the landlord, if at all possible,” Webb said.

So what happens if a tenant doesn't use the money to pay rent? An attorney for the Center for Arkansas Legal Service, Kendall Lewellen, said tenants will face consequences.

“The tenant still owes that money to the landlord, legally speaking, and the landlord can then try and recover it from them,” Lewellen said. “They can put it on a tenant's credit report, it can affect the tenant's credit score, it will almost certainly affect their rental history and their ability to rent in other places in the future.”

But it's not just consequences involving the landlord.

“Anytime that you're receiving some sort of government funds, those funds need to be spent for what they were given to you for, and people can face a wide variety of consequences for this,” Lewellen explained. “Usually when someone is overpaid some kind of government benefit, the government agency that provided it will actually try and recover it, they will try to be repaid that money, sometimes they will intercept tax refunds.”

DHS could not confirm how many cases have been deemed fraud.

“The DHS Office of Security and Compliance doesn't make determinations of fraud, we conduct research into referrals and if we find that we believe additional action may be warranted we turn over our records to the appropriate law enforcement agency,” Webb said.

As far as any immediate relief for landlords who are dealing with this, unfortunately taking a tenant to court is pretty much the only option.

Keep in mind, if you're a tenant and your landlord wins the case, it's possible your wages could be garnished.

If you need rent or utility assistance, [click here](#).