

TIMES RECORD

NEWS

With eviction moratorium set to expire, agencies continue to offer support for renters

Catherine Nolte Fort Smith Times Record

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President Joe Biden is calling on Congress to extend the moratorium as the delta variant surges across the country.

Only 6.5% of almost \$50 billion in Emergency Rental Assistance aid first approved by Congress in December has been distributed. Many families have yet to receive help from local and state governments who administer the program.

Down to the wire

Biden is reliant on congressional action due to a U.S. Supreme Court ruling last month allowing the moratorium to be extended for a final month. Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh stated in a concurring opinion that he would block any further extensions without "clear and specific congressional authorization."

Rent will come due for millions of tenants across the United States as the national eviction moratorium is set to expire July 31.

The moratorium, which prevented district judges from passing evictions on tenants who have not paid their rent, has been extended or modified four times since it was put in place Sept. 4 by the Centers for Disease Control. The moratorium does not cancel the rent payments, leaving many families scrambling to pay the debt.

Rent relief in Arkansas

Over 40,000 Arkansans say that they are behind on their rent and expect eviction or foreclosure to be either very likely or somewhat likely, according to the U.S. Census Household Pulse survey conducted from June 23 to July 5.

According to the Arkansas Department of Human Services, \$2,272,404.81 in rental assistance has been disbursed to 844 households through the Arkansas Rent Relief Program.

“The total Arkansas allocation is about \$200 million, including about \$173 million that is being administered through the statewide program,” Gavin Lesnick, deputy chief of communications, said.

He went on to explain that the additional amount of the allocation is being administered by Pulaski, Benton and Washington counties, which are large enough that “they were able to apply for their own allocations from the federal program.”

Unlike other states that are facing backlogs, Lesnick said that there is not a waiting list in Arkansas, “but applications are in various stages of completion and review as they move through the system.”

“This is a complex process driven by U.S. Treasury guidelines and state policies,” Lesnick said. “Applications must be submitted by both tenants and landlords, and include specific documentation, to demonstrate need and enable the state to verify eligibility for assistance.”

Lesnick said that “Arkansans who may be affected don’t have to wait for the eviction moratorium to expire. If they are behind on rent or utilities, they can apply now by visiting ar.gov/rentrelief. Through this program, eligible Arkansans can receive assistance paying past due rent and utilities as well as up to three months at a time of prospective rent.”

The Arkansas Rent Relief Program website provides information in English, Spanish and Marshallese. Individuals can also call 855-736-8275 to speak with a representative about the process.

Where to find rental assistance

The Crawford-Sebastian Community Development Council offers multiple avenues of support for families and individuals who have fallen behind on their rent.

Robin Moses, director of the family services program, encourages those in crisis to contact them as soon as possible to receive support.

“We have a lot of people who have used it, but I feel like coming up ... there’s going to be a lot of people in need. We are trying to get the word out there that we do have the funds,” Moses said.

Moses stressed that there is paperwork involved and there must be cooperation between the landlord and the client.

“If they’ll both work together, this is only going to help both of them,” Moses said.

The Arkansas Fresh Start program pays up to two and a half months of rent if the applicant is approved. The online application can be accessed at arfreshstart.com.

Applicants will need an ID, a copy of their rental agreement and four weeks of pay stubs or a claims history report from the unemployment office.

The Community Services Block Grant rental assistance program pays for up to \$700 of rent over the course of two consecutive months. Applicants must have a notarized eviction notice.

The AR Cares program provides helps with mortgage defaults and rental assistance. Applicants must meet income qualifications and prove that they have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic such as a positive COVID-19 test.

The Community Development Block Grant Coronavirus Response funds aid Fort Smith residents. Applicants must live within the city limits and have proof of being impacted by the pandemic, such as a positive COVID-19 test.

The Emergency Solutions Grant assists those who are currently in their home and are trying to preserve them. Applicants must have proof of being impacted by the pandemic such as a positive COVID-19 test or pandemic unemployment assistance.

Depending on the funding source, applications can be completed online, through mail or by email. For more information, email Brittany Hamilton at bhamilton@cscdcaa.org or call 479-785-2303 extension 126.

For individuals on the brink of homelessness, the council recommends them to the Next Step Day Room and the Riverview Hope Campus for support services.

Dana Crawford, family services operations manager, said that the council can send links via email, paper applications via mail or work with clients over the phone, depending on the funding source application.

In applying to any of these assistance programs, Moses and Crawford ask for patience during the application process.

“We see a lot of repeat clients, but we know that there are families out there that need help,” Crawford said.

Where to find legal help

Kendell Lewellen, managing attorney, said that with the end of the moratorium, individuals are still able to access help with the **Center** for Arkansas Legal Services.

“Our clients are low-income people who have tended to struggle with housing insecurity, so I expect to see more housing insecurity in the coming weeks and months after the moratorium is lifted,” Lewellen said.

Lewellen explained that tenants will no longer be able to rely on the eviction moratorium as a defense in a case.

“That doesn’t mean that they won’t have any defense, and it would certainly be worthwhile for them to speak to a legal aid attorney for a free review of their case, but many people will no longer be able to use that defense,” Lewellen said.

Lewellen explained that due to the court process for evictions, the evictions will likely be staggered for months, rather than mass evictions when the moratorium expires.

“That will vary by courts across the state, but I have no reason to expect that around here,” Lewellen said.

Lewellen said that it is a case-by-case basis, but “unless the person has a compelling defense ... they absolutely need to be looking at other housing options at that time.”

“If someone has somewhere to go, it is almost always in their best interest to move rather than try to contest an eviction. Unfortunately, many people don’t have those options,” Lewellen said.

The **Center** for Arkansas Legal Services also offers an in-person “help desk” at the Riverview Hope Campus from 9 to 11:30 a.m. on the first and second Mondays of each month.

“It's the same time people go there to pick up utility and rental assistance from the St. Anne's Society,” Lewellen said. “People can still apply for our services through our Helpline, but people can also apply in person at our help desk if they would prefer.”

Fort Smith residents should contact the **Center** for Arkansas Legal Services at arkansaslegal.org or (800) 950-5817.

Catherine Nolte is a corps member with Report for America, a national service program that places journalists into local newsrooms. She can be reached at cnolte@swtimes.com.