

LOCAL NEWS

Marin renters allotted \$1M more in pandemic aid

By **RICHARD HALSTEAD** | rhalstead@marinij.com | Marin Independent Journal

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Marin County and the Marin Community Foundation are jointly providing an additional \$1 million in rental assistance to residents whose livelihoods have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

The county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday approved \$500,000 in rental assistance to match a \$500,000 grant from the foundation for the same purpose. The aid is targeted at low-income residents in peril of becoming homeless.

Advocates for renters hailed the move but called on the supervisors to prevent tenants from getting hit with huge bills for back rent when the county's moratorium on evictions expires on May 31.

The action on Tuesday followed a similar relief effort last month. On March 24, the county provided \$500,000 to match a previous \$500,000 grant from the foundation, and \$650,000 of that was earmarked for rental assistance.

"Since then, though, the money has run out," Benita McLarin, director of the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services, told supervisors Tuesday, "and there continues to be huge interest in the program."

Ashley Hart McIntyre, the county's homelessness policy analyst, said, "The need for rental assistance due to income loss from COVID-19 has been absolutely overwhelming."

McIntyre said that in the first week of the program, community organizations giving out the loans on the county's behalf received \$2.4 million worth of requests.



“We received an estimated 1,500 requests across all the different agencies administering the fund,” McIntyre said. However, there may have been some duplication on those requests, she said.

As of last week, 587 rental assistance grants had been provided.

In addition to allocating the \$500,000 on Tuesday, supervisors also directed staffers to explore the possibility of using an additional \$938,000 for low-income housing assistance from funds the county expects through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act.

McIntyre said even that extra money would not cover all of the requests for rental assistance through the month of May.

So far the county has contracted with a handful of nonprofits to distribute its grants: Ritter Center, Adopt a Family of Marin, the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin County, North Marin Community Services and Community Action Marin. Community Action Marin is working with three additional organizations: Canal Alliance, Women Helping All People and West Marin Community Services.

McIntyre said two-thirds of the grant requests have come from residents of San Rafael’s predominantly Latino Canal neighborhood.

The supervisors once again conducted their Tuesday meeting by video conference to maintain social distancing. Members of the public participated by submitting email comments, and the comments were read aloud by a supervisors’ aide.

“This funding is critical for tenants across the county who live paycheck to paycheck and suddenly have no income,” Sami Mericle, a spokeswoman for the Marin Organizing Committee, wrote in an email, “however, the funding will not be enough to support families who have lost their income and still to pay for rent, groceries and other basic necessities.”

“Even with the rental assistance being offered, tenants will not be able to pay two or three months rent on June 1 with no new source of income,” Mericle added. “We will see a tide of evictions in June unless the board acts now to strengthen the county’s evictions moratorium.”

The committee issued a statement calling on the Board of Supervisors to adopt an ordinance giving tenants at least 180 days after the local state of emergency expires to repay rent owed to landlords. The group also urged the supervisors to take bolder action to prohibit landlords from harassing and intimidating tenants.



The organization cited several alleged incidents, including: a landlord who increased rent by 6% during the state of emergency; a landlord who served an eviction notice and removed the bed of a 70-year-old essential worker over concerns that she might have coronavirus symptoms; a landlord who pressured a disabled tenant to put her April rent on a credit card; a landlord who threatened to lock out a tenant after the tenant notified him of an inability pay; and landlords who pressured tenants to sign repayment agreements.

Stephanie Haffner, executive director of Legal Aid of Marin, wrote in an email that her organization is reaching its capacity to respond to calls for assistance.

In a separate email, Josh Sullivan, Legal Aid of Marin's supervising attorney, wrote, "While the majority of Marin's landlords have been understanding and compassionate during this pandemic, the board should amend the eviction moratorium to address the minority of landlords who are using this state of emergency to increase the imbalance of power that already heavily favors landlords in this housing crisis."

Commenting outside of the meeting, Joby Tapia, secretary of the Marin Rental Property Association, said, "A lot of times landlords have extraordinary expenses that are just barely met by the rent. There is going to be pain for everybody, but it can't just be focused on one group. It has to be shared, especially by the people who are demanding that the landlords pay them."

Supervisor Judy Arnold said, "We need to realize this has hurt landlords, too, and they are not all the black hats. I've talked to landlords who were not able to pay their property taxes because their tenants had no money. We ought to try to keep a balance."

Marin County Counsel Brian Washington told supervisors a proposal for what the county's next move might be when the eviction moratorium expires could be ready for discussion at their April 28 meeting.

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Richard Halstead | Reporter

Richard Halstead is a news reporter covering Marin County news, politics, health care, social services, Fairfax and San Anselmo.





rhalstead@marinij.com

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