

**BUSINESS**

# Marin supervisors set aside \$400,000 for legal help for renters

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Marin County supervisors allocated \$400,000 Tuesday for legal assistance to low-income tenants and mediation of landlord-tenant disputes.

The bulk of the county money, \$310,000, will go to Legal Aid of Marin to provide legal services to low-income renters. The other \$90,000 will help underwrite neutral mediation services available to both landlords and tenants provided by the consumer protection unit of the Marin County District Attorney's Office.

Most of the money will come from the county's general fund reserve, but Marin cities and towns also chipped in \$100,000. The Marin Community Foundation also recently provided Legal Aid of Marin with a \$120,000 grant for the same purpose.

These moves follow new state and federal actions adopted earlier this month to protect tenants who have been unable to pay their rent due to COVID-19 from being evicted.



On Aug. 31, both houses of the Legislature passed AB 3088, titled the Tenant, Homeowner, and Small Landlords Relief and Stabilization Act. Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the bill. The Judicial Council's ban on evictions ended the next day.

Under AB 3088, rent unpaid between March 1 and Aug. 31 will be converted to civil debt if delinquent renters submit a sworn declaration that COVID-19 was the reason for their nonpayment within 15 days of being served an eviction notice. The law permits landlords to begin seeking payment of unpaid rent in small claims court beginning in March.

Tenants who fail to pay at least 25% of their rent between Sept. 1 and Jan. 31, however, will be subject to eviction. The remaining 75% of their rent will likewise be converted to civil debt.

Earlier this month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Robert Redfield signed a declaration barring evictions nationwide in cases where tenants are likely to become homeless or be forced to move in with other people who live in close quarters.

Marin County Administrator Matthew Hymel said the county's aim in funding these efforts is to "get ahead of the problem and try to arrange as many rent repayment agreements and modification agreements as possible to avoid future evictions."

Thomas Peters, the Marin Community Foundation's CEO, said, "As the matrix of uncertainty expands for so many individuals and families already struggling, the need for legal expertise is more critical than ever."

Stephanie Haffner, Legal Aid of Marin's executive director, said demand for her organization's services has doubled since last year.

"The county's support will allow Legal Aid of Marin to scale up its capacity commensurate with the demand," Haffner said, "and to provide culturally competent bilingual legal services to share information about tenants' rights and responsibilities."

Lucie Hollingsworth, a senior attorney with Legal Aid of Marin, said her office has received dozens of calls from people who have received 15-day eviction notices and are panicking.

"A lot of my time was spent last week, explaining to clients how AB 3088 works," Hollingsworth said. "It is obviously not very user-friendly."



Lisel Blash, a member of the Marin Environmental Housing Collaborative, told supervisors Tuesday, “We are already hearing so many stories of tenants facing displacement. Many are confused about their rights under the new state and federal eviction restrictions.”

But Joby Tapia, secretary of the Marin Rental Property Association, said evictions aren’t really a problem in Marin at the moment.

“We really don’t have landlords proposing evictions and trying to get people out on the street,” Tapia said. “That funding would go much farther if it were a cooperative agreement with landlords to help reduce the outstanding debt. We need a solution that helps both tenants and landlords.”

Regarding demand for mediation services, Deputy District Attorney Andy Perez said most of the inquiries his office is getting right now has to do with the new eviction laws; however, he expects to see more eviction-related cases soon.

“By working collaboratively with Legal Aid of Marin, we hope to keep as many cases out of court as possible,” Perez said.

Sandy Stadtler, a member of Kol Shofar and volunteer for Legal Aid of Marin, said, “We are already seeing new cases in which landlords are increasing rents, seeking to evict people – sometimes legally, sometimes illegally.”

The Marin Organizing Committee (MOC), to which both Kol Shofar and the Marin Environmental Housing Collaborative belong, is calling on the Board of Supervisors to take additional measures to address the housing funding crisis created by COVID-19.

MOC is urging supervisors to adopt the CDC protections locally, freeze rent increases and provide more money for rental assistance to help both renters and landlords.

Blash said, “We must all encourage the state and federal government to provide additional economic assistance to tenants so that property owners can continue to receive rent and to work with the banks to enhance mortgage forbearance options for property owners.”

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