

Pastors call on leaders to help residents with rent, utility payments amid coronavirus fallout

By Kaitlin Bain- Updated 10:11 am CDT, Thursday, May 28, 2020

A group of local pastors are calling on Beaumont, Port Arthur and Jefferson County to establish a program that helps area residents cover past-due rent, utility and other costs that many haven't been able to pay amid stay-at-home orders, lost jobs and closed businesses.

Gov. Greg Abbott may have allowed many businesses to reopen with others on the way, but Rev. Oveal Walker with Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Beaumont said a paycheck in two weeks may not cut it for expenses that have already come due.



“With things opening up, some people are just going to work. We understand that some people who were getting unemployment might have had enough to keep up, but now we’re looking ahead to when unemployment isn’t there and the jobs aren’t back,” he said, adding that the coalition also is looking for an extension to a stay on eviction proceedings. “There should be some money put aside to help people get through the upcoming difficult times.”

He said numbers collected by the coalition show that need.

According to a letter from the coalition to local leaders, the top needs voiced to 211 from March 1 to May 15 - the majority of which came in April - were for rent payment assistance or the housing authority, coronavirus tests or controls, food stamps or the food pantry, utility payment assistance and unemployment or financial assistance.

The Beaumont Housing Authority is seeing a similar trend.

More Information

By the numbers

- Jefferson County confirmed COVID-19 cases:

Beaumont	420
Port Arthur	61
Nederland	16
Groves	12
Port Neches	9
China	3
Cheek	2
Nome	2
Fannett	1

- Source: Beaumont and Port Arthur public health departments

Executive Director Allison Landrum said the agency had about \$18,000 in delinquent rent across its 852 units at the end of January - before coronavirus hit Southeast Texas. At the end of April, that number had jumped to \$26,000 and in May, the agency is at \$48,000.

“So that’s a 166% increase in rent delinquency from pre-COVID to now,” she said.

But tenants aren’t the only ones impacted by the inability to make rent payments, she noted.

When enough tenants are unable to or stop paying rent, it impacts the landlord’s ability to pay the mortgage or other bills on the unit the tenant is living in.

Top hits: **Get Beaumont Enterprise stories sent directly to your inbox**

“We haven’t done a study to see why these tenants aren’t able to pay their rent to see if it’s job loss or that they know about the eviction moratorium and may be taking advantage of that in case something else happens,” she said. “But I do think there is a need for a fund to help those that are suffering from not being able to pay rent or utilities.”

Walker said the coalition doesn’t have a plan for how such a program would be rolled out, but they were inspired by similar initiatives already taken on by other cities and counties.

For example, in the city of Houston, which got a direct allocation of funds from the CARES Act, more than 12,000 families exhausted the city’s nearly \$15 million assistance program in just 90 minutes.

Walker said the church community will continue to do what it can to help people with these kinds of needs. But with many members of a congregation out of work, local churches aren’t getting as many donations as usual and the workload is getting to be too much.

Various elected officials, including Jefferson County Judge Jeff Branick and Beaumont Mayor Becky Ames, said the region is looking at a similar program. But it’s taking longer to put together, in part because of some of the regulations and process that comes with not getting a direct allocation.

Branick said during a meeting of the county commissioners earlier this week that the state of Texas has allowed local governments to use up to 25% of money they've been given to respond to COVID-19 to remedy economic damage done in the community as a result of the virus. And he's been working with county staff for more than a week to potentially start a county rental assistance program.

However, he cautioned, the program likely wouldn't be very large because the county doesn't get the bulk of the funding, as the state's formula for awarding money is based on the number of residents within a specific area. So Jefferson County only will receive funding based on residents that live in the unincorporated part of the county.

"The city of Beaumont is going to get about \$21 million, the county is going to get about \$5 million, Port Arthur will get about \$10 million," he said.

For now, he said the county is waiting for more guidance from the state on how an assistance program could be rolled out before seeking approval from the commissioners court.

Ames, when discussing the matter at this week's Beaumont City Council meeting, said the rent assistance money coming to Jefferson County is being administered by Some Other Place. However, she noted that the situation is relatively fluid and staff is working to put the pieces together on what money and grants would go towards.

A representative from Some Other Place could not be reached Wednesday.

City Manager Kyle Hayes, who said the city's only getting about \$6.6 million, suggested the council wait to look at its expenses related to the pandemic before making a determination on how the allocations should be used.

"Our recommendation is to get this funding and let's see what happens in the next few months," he said, later adding that next year's budget could include some of the hardest financial decisions any council member has made in their tenure.

The city could be eligible for more than double the \$6.6 million through reimbursements from the state.

While testing, overtime and other coronavirus-related expenses are slowing at this time, Hayes said the council simply doesn't know if the virus could ramp back up again in a few months and require spending more money.

To this point, the city of Beaumont has spent just over \$1.3 million to respond to pandemic. Jefferson County has spent about \$2 million.

On Wednesday, the city of Beaumont confirmed an additional 10 positive cases of coronavirus — the largest single-day increase this week. Positive cases also confirmed in Groves and Port Arthur on Wednesday brings the total number of cases confirmed in Jefferson County to at least 527.