

Marin Independent Journal

Opinion

Marin Voice: Supervisors should help renters and approve bigger aid package



HOUSING: Henry Newhall and Sam Langley, both 6, sit with signs during a press conference and rally in front of Saint Raphael Church in San Rafael, Calif. on Friday, Aug. 17, 2018. Marin Organizing Committee and Legal Aid organized the event to protest 40 percent rent increases for apartment buildings in the Canal neighborhood. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

By TOM GABLE and STEPHANIE HAFFNER |
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As we settle into the second week of a shelter-in-place order, many of our neighbors are facing a second crisis: how to pay April rent.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors has an opportunity to alleviate the pressure renters are facing by passing a moratorium on evictions.

Too many Marin workers are losing wages because of reduced hours and layoffs during this state of emergency. For people living paycheck-to-paycheck, a few weeks of lost pay can be catastrophic. Legal Aid of Marin has already received calls from people facing possible eviction because of reduced income as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, with more certain to come after April 1 rent is due.

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That is why, last week, the Marin Organizing Committee sent a letter to the Board of Supervisors and every mayor and city council member in Marin county calling for an immediate moratorium on evictions.

The proposed moratorium on the supervisors' Tuesday agenda would remain in place until May 31, and can be extended if the state of emergency continues. It would prevent evictions for tenants who experience a loss of income due to COVID-19. It would not absolve tenants of their responsibility to pay rent; instead, it would allow them to remain housed until they are able to resume work.

We commend the county for swift action on this issue, and for crafting an ordinance that applies to all of Marin.

But we know May 31 will come quickly, and families out of work during the shelter-in-place order will not be able to earn enough to pay back rent in such a short period of time. Of Marin's renters, 26% pay at least half of their income toward rent — it is unreasonable to expect them to be able to make up at least three weeks of lost income by the end of May while still putting food on the table and meeting other basic needs.

We urge the supervisors to vote for the proposed moratorium, and to further protect tenants by extending the grace period for rent repayment to 180 days, and by barring any late fees.

Because the burden of proving lost income will fall on the tenant, resources are needed to ensure tenants have access to the information they need without leaving their homes. While community institutions will do their part, the County should also lead by creating multilingual materials on this ordinance, writing sample notice letters for tenants, and prioritizing outreach so renters know their options — including rental assistance available through the new emergency fund established by the Marin Community Foundation and the County. Many renters in Marin County — people who mow lawns, clean houses, take care of children — may not be eligible for safety net resources like unemployment insurance or disability pay, even though they are valued members of the Marin community and the Marin community relies heavily on their labor.

In addition, we ask the county to consider a similar moratorium on foreclosures during this time. Homeowners, like renters, are also vulnerable. Such a measure would also protect small landlords who may be affected by tenants' temporary inability to pay rent.

Families struggling to pay bills, care for children when schools are closed, and keep themselves (and thereby the entire community) safe and healthy should not be faced with eviction and homelessness as a result of circumstances beyond their control. As it is nearly impossible to find new housing in the midst of this crisis, tenants who are evicted right now would be forced to violate the shelter-in-place order by moving in with another family or sleeping on the streets. This is not only unjust, but greatly undermines the work of Marin Health & Human Services to mandate social distancing to slow the spread of COVID-19.

On Tuesday, although MOC leaders cannot be physically present due to the shelter-in-place order, we will stand with our neighbors in support of a moratorium on evictions in Marin.

Pastor Tom Gable of Marin Lutheran Church and Stephanie Haffner of Legal Aid of Marin are leaders with the **Marin Organizing Committee** — a broad-based organization composed of 22 Marin congregations and non-profits working together to address the pressures on families and change public policy for the common good.