

Faith-labor coalition calls for keeping people housed during pandemic

Michael Karlik, Colorado Politics April 9, 2020

A coalition of 22 faith, labor and civic organizations on Tuesday called for landlords and financial institutions to join a discussion for ways to keep people in their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread layoffs. “Even during normal times, it’s not unusual for someone to spend 50% to 60% of their monthly income on housing. But now, that’s untenable,” said the Rev. John Anderson of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Arvada.



Anderson explained that while some jurisdictions have halted evictions, some landlords have worked with tenants to delay the payment of rent, and some banks have agreed to restructure loans, adherence to those practices is uneven.

“In 2008, taxpayers bailed out financial institutions,” Anderson said. “So banks are in a strong enough position today to help take the lead on this solution. And if landlords were given help with their mortgages, then they also ought to — in return — help their tenants.” He added that he hoped landlords and banks would contact the coalition, **Coloradans for the Common Good**, but that there was no active effort to push for an executive order or legislation to mandate the group’s goals.

Joyce Brooks of the NAACP pointed out that calls to suspend rent collections for out-of-work tenants would lead to further policy problems after the pandemic. “Tenants who lost their income will not be able to pay several months’ rent when the crisis subsides,” she said. The result would be “a tsunami of evictions,” assuming people are able to stay housed through the stay-at-home order.

Landlords who depend primarily on rent to pay for mortgages on their properties, in turn, would be at a disadvantage. Brooks suggested that focusing on deferred mortgage payments for landlords “will put them in a better position to help their tenants.”

In addition to the NAACP, multiple faith leaders and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association supported having such a discussion.

In the past two weeks, COVID-19-related layoffs have prompted nearly 10 million Americans to apply for unemployment insurance. One estimate from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis projected that national unemployment could reach 32%. In a recent relief bill, Congress gave a one-time payment of \$1,200 to most adults, and boosted weekly unemployment benefits by \$600 for four months.

An online petition with just under 1,100 signatures has called for a freeze on rent collections in Colorado continuing indefinitely. Its supporters include Black Lives Matter 5280, multiple labor unions and Denver Councilwoman Candi CdeBaca. Gov. Jared Polis has not shown an inclination toward such a policy.

At Ascension Parish in Montbello, where the congregation is approximately 90% Hispanic, coalition member Rev. Dan Norick said that traditionally, the most common reason his parishioners seek help from the church is for rental assistance. “I’ve been questioning myself: what’s going to happen” as a result of the downturn, he asked. “Will people live on the streets?”