

County creates \$15M fund aimed at most vulnerable

By Zach Despart STAFF WRITER

Low-income families, residents in the country illegally, victims of domestic violence and children aging out of foster care are the target audience for a \$15 million coronavirus relief fund Harris County Commissioners Court created Tuesday.

The fund, proposed by Precinct 1 Commissioner Rodney Ellis, aims to assist residents who are ineligible for federal aid through the CARES Act or for whom the \$1,200 stimulus payments are insufficient.

“I think you can feel the pain of people hurting,” Ellis said. “I also want to make sure ... we are sensitive to our small businesses, but also those people who have to go catch the early bus to go wash dishes and bus tables.”

The Greater Houston Community Foundation and United Way will manage the program, which will provide one-time payments directly to residents to cover essential expenses, including food, utilities and housing.

Residents will be able to make requests online once applications become available.

To be eligible, residents must live in Harris County and have a total household income below 70 percent of the federal Area Median Income benchmark; in Houston, that is about \$53,400 for a family of four. Residents also would be eligible if they qualify for a federal public assistance program, such as SNAP, WIC or Medicaid.

Households with active cases of domestic violence, homeless people living in shelters and children who have aged out of foster care do not have to meet those requirements.

A draft of the relief fund proposal states recipients would receive aid within 45 to 60 days, though Ellis said he hoped disbursements can begin within weeks. San Antonio, Austin and Dallas have established similar funds.

Ellis said he wanted to ensure the roughly 500,000 Houston-area immigrants, who are in the country illegally, can receive aid, since they are ineligible for federal aid despite often paying income taxes.

Sandra Valencia, who lives in northwest Houston, said she is a domestic violence survivor who has been unable to work for six weeks because she contracted the novel corona-virus. She urged court members to approve the relief fund so people in her situation could receive aid.

“I have no money to feed my child, and I just don’t know what to do,” Valencia said.

Minister Jacqueline Hailey of the New Hope Baptist Church said housing is a particular area of need, as Friday marks the second time rent will come due since the pandemic reached the Houston area in March.

“There are 70,000 Houston renters who were unable to pay their rent last month, and there will be even more in May,” Hailey said.

Court members approved the program on a 3-2 vote, with the two Republican members dissenting.

Precinct 3 Commissioner Steve Radack said Ellis and the court’s analyst had provided too few details about the program.

Precinct 4 Commissioner Jack Cagle said he opposed using tax revenue for the fund, and said he was concerned his constituents would not benefit fairly from the program.

“I am supportive of this entity,” Cagle said. “I am not supportive of taking property tax funds and putting that into it.”

The \$15 million will come from Harris County’s \$262 million rainy day fund, which

is reserved to help the county recover from natural disasters and economic downturns. zach.despart@chron.com

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