

Travis County approves \$10M for direct rental and mortgage assistance

Wednesday, May 13, 2020 by Jessi Devenyns

On Tuesday, the Travis County Commissioners Court unanimously approved the allocation of \$10 million for direct rent, mortgage and utility assistance. The rental assistance will be available to Travis County residents.

This one-time cash assistance was complemented by a \$2.4 million budget transfer to the county's emergency assistance program to make up for the pre-Covid funding shortfall. The budget transfer will be an ongoing source of financial

assistance for county residents seeking help with rent or mortgage payments and represents a 355 percent increase in funding. However, the county will need to use the \$10 million of rental assistance funds taken from its \$61 million Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act allocation by December.

To ensure that the funds are equitably distributed and stretched as far as they can go, Kirsten Siegfried, the division director for the county's family support services, said the Health and Human Services Department expanded eligibility requirements.

People earning 150 to 250 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines are now qualified to receive rental assistance up to three times between now and Dec. 31. Travis County traditionally limits its rental assistance funding to once a year.

Additionally, the county will provide assistance for up to 100 percent of the fair market rent value determined by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Typically the county only provides assistance for 50 percent of the fair market rent rate.

As the county runs a rental assistance program normally, this \$10 million will supplement the existing fund that awards grants on a rolling basis. Eligible residents may apply through the county's Health and Human Services [website](#).



Photo by David Goehring

To supplement the rental assistance program, county staff proposed allocating \$250,000 in utility assistance to Travis County residents. Currently, the county provides up to \$235 a year to residents who need assistance paying their utility bills. However, under this proposal, that figure will increase to \$1,500 and assistance can be used twice in the months leading up to Dec. 31.

Siegfried told the Commissioners Court, “We do not think we will have to rely heavily on county funds for utility assistance.” She explained that in addition to the relief Austin Energy is [providing](#) its customers, the county’s utility assistance program is able to tap into eight separate funding sources outside of federal emergency aid.

Although the county is committed to \$10 million in rental and utility assistance, community members came to the May 12 meeting to encourage commissioners to extend greater support.

Susan Oram with [Central Texas Interfaith](#) urged the court to work toward providing \$40 million in rental assistance. As evidence that \$10 million from Travis County will not be enough, she pointed to other large Texas metropolitan areas, like the city of Houston and Harris County, which together have allocated nearly \$30 million in rental assistance, and the \$23.7 million from the city and county of Dallas.

Diana Ramirez, the director of the Economic Development Department, said the county’s newly engaged emergency fund expenditure consultant, Guidehouse, advised that Travis County not commit to spending more than 20 percent of its federal allocation dollars. Already the county has earmarked [\\$10 million](#) for a small business grant program and this additional \$10 million in rental assistance will mean the county has committed one-third of its CARES Act dollars.

Nevertheless, Ramirez called the \$10 million distribution “a drop in the bucket” in terms of meeting the need for assistance in Travis County.

Commissioner Brigid Shea noted that this need for rental assistance is not exclusively a symptom of the greater economic harm that the pandemic has wreaked on the economy. In December she said there was already a “tsunami of need” for assistance. This \$10 million will only temporarily address the increase in the urgent need for emergency rental and mortgage assistance for which the county was already anticipating a \$2 million to \$3 million shortfall in 2020.

This story has been corrected to reflect the fact that the rental assistance program will be available to all Travis County residents. Photo made available through a [Creative Commons license](#).

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