$15 Million In Rent Relief Claimed In Less Than 2 Hours, As Tenant Demand Creates Lag In Response

The site was flooded with some 30,000 users before the application process even opened, the city and Baker Ripley said.

ELIZABETH TROVALL | POSTED MAY 13, 2020

A $15 million Houston rent relief fund was completely drained less than two hours after it launched for tenants on Wednesday morning, with thousands of renters trying to access the relief website leading to technical issues that shut many people out of the process.

The official website for tenants to apply for funding opened at 10 a.m. But the site was flooded with users, and the website appeared to briefly crash due to the high usage. Mayor Sylvester Turner clarified on Wednesday afternoon that the system was “overwhelmed,” but did not officially “crash.”

As many as 30,000 tried to access the website, an indication of the need for rent relief in the wake of COVID-19, which has led to business shutdowns and skyrocketing unemployment. Housing advocates have said the money does not go far enough in helping renters.

Rental assistance funding was completely pledged by 11:40 a.m.

The $15M for Rental Assistance has been entirely pledged, and applications are now closed. We understand that this funding is nowhere near enough to meet the need of all Houstonians. @BakerRipley @HoustonTX

Close to 12,000 households were prescreened before the system was shut down. Local nonprofit Baker Ripley, which runs the program, will assess those applications before providing money directly to the landlords by the end of the month, Turner said.

“I’m going to tell you, if we kept it open, we would have had thousands more who were applying,” Turner said. Turner has acknowledged this, and last week wrote a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell asking Congress to adopt a proposal for a $100 billion emergency rental relief fund, along with a $75 billion homeowner relief fund.

Under the city’s plan, landlords had to apply to participate in the program beforehand and agree to forgive all late fees and penalties, set up payment plans for back rent, and halt prior eviction proceedings.
At St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, people started lining up at 5 a.m. to apply for rent assistance, with help from church volunteers. The church set up an area to help people who may not have access to a computer, or who need language assistance.

“If you give out $15 million in half an hour, that tells you the need” said Joe Higgs, an organizer for church-based advocacy group The Metropolitan Organization, who was at the church. Volunteer Daphne Gonzalez was also there and helped families enroll online. She said she finished applications for five families when the funding ran out.

The Houston rental assistance website was flooded with applications just minutes after the process began Wednesday at 10 a.m., causing many people in need to be locked out. By 11:40 a.m., all $15 million worth of relief had been claimed, the city said.

“We know these people need the help for their rent, so it was disappointing,” said Gonzalez.

When she tried to submit information for her sixth applicant, the funding was gone. Gonzalez said when she told the woman the news, the applicant looked down and didn’t say a word.

Houston resident Flor Rumaldo was also denied rent relief, but for a different reason: Her landlord didn’t sign up for the program ahead of time.

Landlords could begin applying for about $14.4 million worth of funding on Thursday. The rest of the $15 million was earmarked for administrative fees to local nonprofit Baker Ripley, which runs the program.

But if landlords did not sign up, renters were unable to get apply for that relief on Wednesday.

Rumaldo is behind on rent because she hasn’t been able to work at her job, preparing food for a taqueria. She said she is the breadwinner in her household, which includes her two kids, her sister and her sister’s child.

Now she’s afraid the family will be kicked out of her apartment.

When Rumaldo approached her apartment complex about the rental assistance program, she said they brushed her off.

“They told me it wasn’t their problem,” she said in Spanish.