

Local Organizations Take Steps To Prevent A 'Tsunami Of Evictions' This Summer

By ELEANOR BENNETT · JUN 1, 2020

Longtime local resident Maria works in housekeeping and lives in a shared mobile home in El Jebel. She said she's worried about paying her \$300-a-month rent this summer. (We're not using her full name because she's undocumented.)

"My life is very simple," Maria said. "I work, work, work, and now with the quarantine we can't even work, so financially, coronavirus has really affected me."

Maria moved to the valley 20 years ago from Veracruz, Mexico. She said living paycheck to paycheck has been hard at times, but she's always had a steady job to rely on. That is, until March, when the Snowmass hotel she works for closed.

Like most undocumented immigrants during the pandemic, Maria said she's [not eligible](#) for emergency government assistance or unemployment benefits. But she recently received \$950 in [financial support](#) from local [nonprofit MANAUS](#).

"Thank God right now I have enough to get by," she said. "It just comes down to me having to really stretch that... this month I do have the money to pay the rent, but I don't have it for July or August."

Colorado Governor Jared Polis [has extended](#) the temporary ban on evictions until June 13. It was set to expire Monday, June 1. It may be a temporary fix for a looming eviction crisis.

"These next couple of weeks we are doing all we can to prevent what people are saying will be a tsunami of evictions."

As many in the Roaring Fork Valley like Maria struggle to pay rent during COVID-19, a handful of local organizations are working to start conversations between tenants and landlords before evictions start.

Jennifer Wherry, the Executive Director of [Alpine Legal Services](#), is trying to help those struggling to pay rent. They provide free civil legal aid to vulnerable citizens and victims of crimes from Parachute to Aspen. Many of their clients are seeking protection from an eviction.



Robert Hubbell, manager of the El Jebel Mobile Home Park, said they are working with nonprofits like Valley Settlement and English In Action to help tenants apply for economic assistance. "For us, evictions are a last resort," Hubbell said. CREDIT ELEANOR BENNETT / ASPEN PUBLIC RADIO

“These next couple of weeks we are doing all we can to prevent what people are saying will be a tsunami of evictions,” Wherry said.

Wherry and her team of attorneys know it will be hard to stop the wave of evictions in the courts alone. That’s why their firm is using \$35,000 of the \$50,000 in grant money they received from the [Aspen Community Foundation](#) to start a free mediation program for landlords and tenants.

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While every situation is different, Wherry says mediators help facilitate a realistic payment plan that both parties can agree to. This could include negotiating rent extensions, forgiving a portion of the rent and connecting tenants with economic relief grants.

“We want to build a collaborative culture right now,” Wherry said, “and get landlords and tenants talking to one another and avoiding evictions to begin with.”

Wherry said Alpine Legal Services is part of a network of local institutions called [Mountain Voices Project](#). Together they’ve formed a team of volunteers to call local tenants, landlords and lenders and find out what they’re experiencing.

“We’re hearing that the stress is not just on tenants who are frankly facing homelessness,” Wherry said, “but also landlords because ultimately they hold the power in determining how many tenants they will evict and balancing that against their own financial wellbeing.”

Wherry said that June is the month that many local tenants and landlords are nervous about.

“We’ve now been facing two months of unemployment and it’s out of everyone’s control because there’s just no income coming into these families,” Wherry said. “And some of the local organizations who have been providing economic assistance are running out of funds, so June is going to be stressful.”

Wherry said evictions hurt more than just those who lose their home.

“Evictions are detrimental not just for the landlords who might have a hard time finding new tenants and who want to avoid the expense of filing an eviction,” Wherry said, “but evictions make it very hard for tenants to rent again, which ultimately leads to homelessness for many people, which is incredibly costly for our entire community.”

Robert Hubbell is the manager of [Crawford Properties](#), which owns the El Jebel Mobile Home Park along with several commercial properties.

“There are a lot of unknowns, but I’m hopeful for change, like Mexicans, we say, ‘Hope dies last.’”

Hubbell said they've been through tough times before including the 2008 financial crisis and the Basalt fire, but COVID-19 is different.

"This has been much longer and slower to get back to opening businesses," Hubbell said. "We're usually very low in delinquency rates, usually around 1%, but now we're at 13, 14%."

Hubbell said they haven't signed up for a mediation program, but they are working with nonprofits like [Valley Settlement](#) and [English In Action](#) to help their tenants apply for economic assistance.

"For us, evictions are a last resort," Hubbell said. "We work as hard as we can with our tenants to come up with a solution for a payment option so they can stay in their home."

For her part, Maria says she's looking forward to when she can get back to work and not have to worry about paying her rent on time.

"There are a lot of unknowns when you think about the future," Maria said, "but I'm hopeful for change, you know, like Mexicans, we say, 'Hope dies last.'"

Alpine Legal Services wants to expand their mediation program throughout the Roaring Fork Valley and Garfield County. Last Thursday, they held a [Zoom presentation](#) with Mountain Voices Project to propose the "Landlord/Tenant Housing Recovery Plan." There were over 160 local leaders in attendance, including representatives from nonprofits, schools and faith-based institutions as well as several Pitkin, Eagle and Garfield county commissioners.



On May 28 Mountain Voices Project, a network of local institutions including Alpine Legal Services, held a Zoom meeting with over 160 participants to propose the "Housing Recovery Plan." The plan involves a mediation program for landlords and tenants and a fund backed by local governments and private donors to help avoid evictions.

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The housing recovery plan involves creating a fund backed by local governments and private donors to support both landlords and tenants. The meeting last Thursday was the first step in getting local institutions, philanthropists and counties to consider coming together and working towards a common goal. Those in attendance were encouraged to take the proposal back to their respective organizations ahead of the next meeting, which is scheduled for later this month.

It's the kind of creative solution that just might be needed to keep hope alive for those like Maria.