



Facing eviction, single mothers with kids hit hardest by need for rental assistance

By Jo Ann Zuñiga, Texas Catholic Herald - JUNE 9, 2020

HOUSTON — Marisol called her parish office at St. Leo the Great Catholic Church in desperation during the chaos of the coronavirus pandemic. She lost her car through repossession, and now possible eviction was looming.

Sorina Serrano, St. Leo's director of social services, said the north Houston church is among those busily working with Catholic Charities and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in distributing rental assistance, food and other help in paying utilities. But as soon as the funds become available, the dollars are quickly distributed and waiting lists abound, she said.

"Most of the people we're helping are single or divorced mothers with young children who have lost their jobs at restaurants or housekeeping. They don't know what they will do next month," Serrano said.

"But we'll keep trying to help them get a job or other assistance if they are eligible," she said.

The City of Houston's \$15 million in rental assistance program as part of the Coronavirus Relief Fund was depleted in 90 minutes after applications opened in mid-May, including about 60 people in line at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church waiting to apply.

Harris County Commissioners Court then approved \$30 million from the Harris County COVID-19 Relief Fund, expected to be dispersed in June.

That amount is estimated to help between 20,000 to 25,000 families to pay for rent, food, medical care, child care and other basic needs. The average amount to be distributed will be up to \$1,200 for households of one to four residents and \$1,500 for households with five people or more, officials said.

Catholic Charities will be among local social service agencies helping to distribute the funds to those with the highest needs, receiving about \$50,000 from funds committed by Harris County for rental assistance. Catholic Charities also works with area parishes to directly assist hundreds of families in the most need.



Parishioners at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Houston in need of rental assistance receive guidance in filling out online applications at the parish's rental assistance clinic. (Photo: St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church)

“Because the need is so high, we’re focusing on the most vulnerable individuals and families in distributing financial assistance: single parents, larger families with young children, seniors, the disabled, immigrants and refugees,” said Cynthia Colbert, CEO and president of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston.

“We are committed to working with the Archdiocese, parishes, and other Catholic ministries to provide a holistic approach to helping families get through the challenges caused by the pandemic. Together, we will recover,” Colbert said.

Joe Higgs of **The Metropolitan Organization, known as TMO**, is among the coalition of nonprofits that have approached the city and county to urge the equitable distribution of those funds.

“We asked City Council to commit \$100 million of the \$404 million in the Coronavirus Relief Fund to rental assistance. But the next day, they committed \$15 million that was distributed online in a matter of minutes to about 12,000 families,” Higgs said.

“A survey shows of the 700,000 rental units in the area, up to 85,000 cannot pay rent at this time. A huge number of the people are service workers, men and women of color, hourly workers who lost their jobs with little if any savings. The need is so immense,” he said.

With any moratoriums on evictions ending, justices of the peace may resume processing eviction notices by mid-June and constables will start showing up at apartments, he said.

“It doesn’t make sense to evict someone who has paid regularly but is not able to currently pay during this crisis. Plus, when someone in uniform shows up to evict, it’s scary as heck, especially for those who may be undocumented,” Higgs said.

Ann Schorno, executive director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) in Houston, agreed, “Now that the eviction moratorium has been lifted, it also lifts the floodgates of those needing help. Many of them do not have access to unemployment benefits or received any stimulus.”

Although unable to continue home visits with clients as SVdP usually would do, virtual home visits for those who have the ability have risen to 1,300 since mid-May, she said.

About \$300,000 in financial assistance have been distributed through the SVdP, and it is also receiving \$150,000 from the Greater Houston COVID-19 Recovery Fund. Initially, SVDP focused more on its 20-plus food pantries located at churches in addition to “pop-ups” in high-need areas, she said.

St. Agnes Academy in the Sharpstown area, St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Kashmere Gardens, and Vietnamese Martyrs Church and Catholic Charismatic Center in southeast Houston are among the locations of “pop-ups” distributing food.

“There’s been more federal coordination for food distribution, especially after it was publicized that milk was being dumped and other gluts of food with restaurants having been closed. So now that food has been making its way to the Houston Food Bank and other outlets. The real problems now are rental and utilities assistance,” Schorno said.

To directly support these rental assistance ministries, visit www.catholiccharities.org and www.svdphouston.org to donate online and help those in need during the pandemic.