

Texas Catholic Herald

Thousands evicted in Houston area before eviction moratorium, rental assistance

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By Jo Ann Zuñiga, Texas Catholic Herald



HOUSTON — According to community leaders, about 10,000 renters have been evicted from March through August in the Houston area before the recent eviction moratorium was put into place by the Center for Disease Control to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The CDC ordered a [national eviction moratorium](#), halting evictions effective Sept. 4 through the end of 2020 as COVID-19 continues to cause health and economic hardships. But residents will still be under obligation to pay rent, so those eligible need to apply to Houston’s \$60 million rental assistance program allocated through the City of Houston and Harris County, said [The Metropolitan Organization](#) (TMO) members, a nonprofit of church groups.

“Evictions put us all at risk,” said TMO’s Bob Fleming. “People who are evicted move in with other people and compound liability to COVID-19 by creating more density.”

Landlords and renters can apply for financial relief through the Houston-based nonprofit, [BakerRipley](#), and deadlines have been removed. Officials said they plan to accept applicants until all of the funds have been distributed. Each individual tenant may be eligible to receive up to \$2,112.

According to officials, more than 8,000 landlords have already signed on, and more than 30,000 tenants have applied.

Baptist Rev. Jaqueline Hailey, as part of a TMO press conference, said, “The CDC order creates a welcomed pause in evictions in this area, but it is only a half-measure because all rents and late fees will continue to pile up and be due when the moratorium expires on December 31.”

To help navigate what can be complicated procedures, the Archdiocese and the Houston Volunteer Lawyers joined Catholic Charities and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in hosting a tenants’ “Know Your Rights: Navigating Tenant Challenges during the Pandemic” [free webinar Sept. 8 in English](#). Another such [webinar is scheduled in Spanish](#) Sept. 24.

Catholic Charities CEO and President Cynthia Colbert opened the webinar with a prayer saying, “Give us open hearts to serve our brothers and sisters.”

Sister Maureen O’Connell, director of the Secretariat for Social Concerns, said, “This pandemic has taken a serious toll on families.”

Part of the webinar, Houston Volunteer Lawyers representative Maricarmen Dollar said she and other lawyers in that office are working on eviction cases and are available at [makejusticehappen.org](#) or at 713-228-0735. Another website is [texaslawhelp.org](#). She explained the multiple steps of the eviction process through a Justice of the Peace trial and possible appeal.

“The moratorium is supposed to stop evictions, but rent is still owed. So we urge those who qualify to apply for financial assistance,” she said.

To qualify, a renter must make less than \$99,000 annually; show loss of income, hours or layoffs because of the pandemic; show renter is making timely partial payments if possible; show if evicted, renter would be homeless or have to move into a shelter or with others.

Then the renter signs the declaration and gives a copy to the landlord with a witness present and keeps a copy as well.

According to news reports, many renters end up self-evicting and moving out because of the fear of constable deputies with court orders banging on their doors and putting any possessions out on the street. Webinar presenters cautioned renters NOT to self-evict without first making an effort to resolve the situation.

Angela Orea, a volunteer with the [Society of Vincent de Paul](#) at Holy Ghost Catholic Church and at St. Thomas More, has been interviewing by phone those facing eviction and looking for help.

“They are not only immigrants but all sorts of people. Dads are crying over the phone about their kids. You have to listen to them because they are hurting,” she said.

Ann Schorno, SVDP executive director, said the organization and its Catholic Church partners have helped more than 149,907 individuals served in the community through drive-through food fairs, provided \$2 million in financial assistance, and provided 4,524 home visits held virtually to see what assistance clients needed, according to its COVID-19 Assistance Community Impact Report from March through August.

“It is a true struggle for so many families in our community. We are all working together to provide the resources, both informational such as the eviction webinar and financial, to help the families move to a sustainable position for the future,” Schorno said.

Catholic Charities has also assisted about 169,000 individuals with food assistance from March through Sept. 5. The Catholic Church’s social services branch also answered 15,540 hotline calls during that time, with 70% concerning rent, 23% food, and nine percent needing assistance with utilities.

Sister O’Connell, offering words of encouragement during the webinar, said, “None of us are alone despite the chaos surrounding us. We are all connected to each other.”