

# Omaha World-Herald

## Midlands Voices: Rental challenges are enormous. County Board can help greatly

By Gloria Austerberry and Karen McElroy Jun 21, 2020

*The writers are co-chairs of **Omaha Together One Community**, a set of member congregations and organizations advocating on civic issues: information at **OTOC.org**.*



*The Douglas County Board. Photo: Brendan Sullivan/The World-Herald*

Imagine dozens, if not hundreds, of families in Douglas County getting evicted every week for non-payment of rent starting the first of July. This is part of the context for a momentous challenge the Douglas County Board of Commissioners is facing. They must distribute \$166 million from the federal CARES Act to address the COVID-19-related burdens of local governments and county residents. At its May 18 meeting, the board heard moving stories of suffering in our county. Clearly, remedies are needed now.

At that same board meeting, Omaha Together One Community joined with nonprofit housing agencies in asking commissioners to allocate a generous portion of the CARES Act funding to address the need for stable housing for vulnerable families. According to a June 10 Omaha World-Herald story, the board is proposing \$20 million for rental assistance and housing. A vote is expected on Tuesday or June 30. While we are encouraged by the amount that has been proposed, we urge the board to consider the following before their vote:

Even before the pandemic, with its toll of illness, lost jobs, lost health care insurance, lost gigs, furloughs and time off work to care for sick family members, a shocking 47% of renters in Omaha were rent-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30% of their monthly income on rent (**U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019**). Now with COVID-19, the figure is most likely higher.

In 2020, the average fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit in Douglas County is \$946 per month. This means that an estimated \$34.8 million is needed to support those 36,845 rent-burdened households in Omaha for one month.

OTOC requests that the Board of Commissioners allocate \$35 million of the CARES Act funds for rental and housing assistance.

We also suggest that assistance flow through contracts with housing agencies that already have proven records helping homeless and near-homeless persons and families. This will ensure that clients know where and how to access assistance, and that landlords will receive payment in a timely manner.

Eviction Court has reopened, with many cases involving non-payment of rent. Without targeted help, many of the most vulnerable will fall victim to devastating consequences. Now is not the time to evict people because of income shortfalls. It is easier for people to practice social distancing in their own homes than in already overcrowded shelters. We all have a better chance of staying healthy when more people remain in stable homes.

Long existing conditions demand longer-term solutions than this month's County Board of Commissioners budgetary decision to address COVID-19-related needs. However, it is crucial to invest now in housing for people experiencing the tragedies of both the pre-pandemic and pandemic economies.

We urge all residents in Douglas Country to support this request with a call or email message to your county commissioner.