

San Antonio Council Votes for \$25 Million Fund to Help Residents With Rent, Food and Medicine

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City council has approved \$25 million in emergency assistance to help residents pay for food, housing and other necessities as the prolonged coronavirus shutdown continues to decimate their livelihoods.

On Thursday, council voted to increase the size of a proposed \$16 million program to \$25 million, allowing eligible residents to request money to cover housing, medicine, groceries, fuel and utilities, including Internet access.



Mayor Ron Nirenberg (left) and Councilman Clayton Perry listen to a speaker at city council meeting.

The COVID-19 Emergency Housing Assistance plan builds on San Antonio's Risk Mitigation Fund, established in 2018 to aid families in danger of being displaced by rising housing costs. Funding for the new program includes both local and federal dollars.

"Many in our community are falling between the cracks of federal and state support," said District 1 Councilman Roberto Treviño, council's chief proponent of the emergency funding. "We, the local government, are their last line of defense for our community and so our policy recommendations should empower city council's decision. We know our community and should be able to provide an outlet of relief that is accessible to all."

Under the program, requested funds are paid directly to landlord, financial institutions and utility companies. Families can also apply for up to \$300 in direct cash to pay for groceries, medicine and fuel.

Before March, the city received an average of 57 inquiries a week for housing assistance. Last week, that number jumped to 5,370.

Linda Davila, housing co-chair for **COPS/Metro Alliance**, said the program represents a major step toward protecting vulnerable families. However, her the community organizing group's data suggests that 30,000 local residents now teeter on the brink of financial disaster. That puts the total need closer to \$70 million.

"We're going to ask the county to match that [\$25 million] if they can," said Davila, who represents St. Timothy Catholic Church. "Then we'll have to go after private dollars to fill in the gaps."

COPS/Metro began pushing city leaders two weeks ago to expand the emergency funding. Because local dollars added to the pot come with fewer restrictions, they'll be available to a larger number of local residents, including those without documents.

"We weren't going to let it go," Davila said. "We met with one councilperson after the other. We met with the city manager, the assistant city managers."

Ultimately, council voted 10-1 in favor of the program. Only District 10's Clayton Perry voted against it.

"I am proud of this vote to ensure that San Antonio workers who have been laid off or furloughed because of the COVID-19 pandemic will be able to pay their rent and stay in their homes," Mayor Ron Nirenberg said. "It is our duty to help the most vulnerable among us, and this crisis has created a true emergency."

Eligibility for the program mirrors that of city's Risk Mitigation Fund. To qualify, applicants must:

- Be the primary lease or mortgage holder on a San Antonio residence.
- Show proof of financial hardship that prevents payment of bills.
- Have an income at or below 100% of the federal Area Median Income. Under those guidelines, a local family earning \$72,000 a year or below would qualify for the program.

San Antonio residents can find more information on the program or apply at the city's **online fair housing site**.