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Ayala: City of San Antonio must pass its own stimulus package for those left behind

Elaine Ayala _ April 21, 2020

Adult children claimed as dependents on tax returns were left out of the federal stimulus package. Disabled Americans claimed as dependents were similarly excluded.

Those without a Social Security number, including undocumented immigrants, failed to qualify for aid, even if they pay federal taxes and property taxes.

Over the last month, the Texas Organizing Project has logged calls from people left behind by federal aid efforts and unemployment benefits and are desperate to find ways to pay rent, mortgages, utilities, grocery bills and other debts.

If eviction suspensions are lifted Thursday, San Antonio will begin to see the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic that will surpass those of a recession.

This calls for the city's own stimulus program.

On Thursday, City Council will consider a proposal to tap nearly \$16 million to expand a risk mitigation program to help residents stay in their homes.

But because some of those monies are federal, the same restrictions will apply. This demands that San Antonio tap its own reserves to help those falling through the cracks.

TOPS and **COPS/Metro Alliance**, both grass-roots organizers, have advocated the move, reaching out to council representatives this week to get an additional \$10 million tacked on to the risk mitigation program they will vote on Thursday.

It already has support on council.

Councilman Roberto Treviño wants a \$25 million program with \$10 million coming from the reserve fund, currently at \$126 million.

He says the city manager's office has been averse to use reserve funds, and Treviño says he has been unable to figure out if the city has ever used its reserve fund for an emergency.

We're clearly in one, as the astonishing San Antonio Food Bank lines can attest.

"Sometimes you have to ruin your credit to stay alive," Treviño said. "This is unprecedented."

The District 1 councilman said he has looked through the city's budget for unused funds.

"I pieced together \$14 million without the reserve funds," he said. "I'm confident we can get there."



Public Facility Corporation Board Member and City Council Member Roberto Treviño listens to discussion during a meeting of the San Antonio Housing Trust Finance Corporation and Public Facility Corporation at the Municipal Plaza building in San Antonio, Texas, Feb. 26, 2020. Photo: Josie Norris, SAEN / Staff Photographer

Jessica Azua, state immigration coordinator for the Texas Organizing Project, says the organization has heard from people desperate for help. Its staff refers needy San Antonians to nonprofit agencies, but what these families most need is to stay in their homes.

Rent and mortgage payments are due in less than two weeks.

“It’s heartbreaking,” she said. “They don’t know how they’re going to make it.”

Among them are waitresses, gardeners, housekeepers and others paid in cash, and people like Teresa Williams, a single mother with 19-year-old twins in college. She just got a job, but both twins lost their part-time jobs.

She claimed them as dependents, making them ineligible for their own stimulus checks.

They’re like Ernesto Gaytan, a San Antonian studying at Baylor University, who was unknowingly claimed as a dependent on his biological father’s federal taxes. That not only lowered the amount of his own tax return but made him ineligible for a stimulus check.

Gaytan now works fulltime in a grocery store in Waco, where he decided to stay in a dorm that provides utilities and Wi-Fi and where his meals come from a campus cafeteria. He didn’t want to burden his already stressed family in San Antonio.

He’s a U.S. citizen, but his mixed-immigration-status family is hurting. It has only one paycheck and will struggle to make the mortgage payment.

His mother Andrea Osorio, an out-of-work housekeeper without a Social Security number, said her savings are gone after four weeks in quarantine. Her non-citizen husband, two minor U.S.-born children and a father with diabetes all live under one roof.

None qualified for a federal stimulus payment.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said.

Azua of the Texas Organizing Project said if this isn’t the time to tap into city reserves, “when *is* the best time? The city of Austin is granting money to community agencies to provide that direct aid. This needs to be done very quickly.”

Williams, the mother of twin college students, was shocked about how many U.S. workers were excluded from the stimulus.

“I love our mayor and his motto, ‘We’re all in this together,’ and he’s absolutely right. If the fund is there, isn’t this what it’s for?”