

Hidalgo Co. starts \$7.5M rent, mortgage relief program

Naxiely Lopez-Puente - May 28, 2020

EDINBURG — Hidalgo County commissioners allocated \$7.5 million of the coronavirus relief fund to a program that will help struggling residents pay up to two months of rent or mortgage payments.

Commissioners unanimously approved the Mortgage and Rent Relief Program during their regularly scheduled meeting Tuesday.



The program, which was initially going to be called the Homestead Relief Program, will be administered by the Hidalgo County Community Service Agency (CSA). And in order to move it forward, commissioners approved the hiring of 13 additional staff members: eight case study managers, four eligibility workers and an accountant.

Those positions will be full-time and temporary. The new hires will cost the county about \$147,000 for 30 weeks of work, beginning June 8 and ending Dec. 31.

Before commissioners approved the expenditure, mayors from small cities asked them to reconsider, or at least wait to make any financial decisions. Commissioners are scheduled to meet with mayors from across Hidalgo County on Thursday for an emergency meeting to discuss how to distribute the \$151 million the county recently received in relief funds from the federal government.

Precinct 4 Commissioner Ellie Torres initially agreed and suggested they table the item, but Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez suggested meeting behind closed doors before taking any action.

When they reemerged about two hours later, they all agreed to move forward with the program's approval.

"All four commissioners were very concerned about this matter and really wanted to get this done as soon as possible for obvious reasons," Cortez said after the vote.

Precinct 2 Commissioner Eddie Cantu also noted the program will accept applications from those living within city limits, too.

"That's for the whole county, and we believe that it's necessary to get that program out there right away because people are already suffering and hurting," he said. "So that's why we approved that. On stuff related to other CARES agenda items, we're going to hold off."

CSA Executive Director Jaime Longoria said families can qualify for assistance if they have lost wages or employment beginning March 13 or been ill with the disease, preventing them from going to work.

Recipients must also have an income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. For a single-person household, that's a yearly wage of \$25,520 and \$52,400 for a family of four, according to information from the U.S. Health and Human Services.

"So we would look back from the day they applied, look back 30 days and review their income to ensure the 200 percent of federal poverty," Longoria told commissioners.

Applicants must be residents of Hidalgo County and must provide proof via a government-issued ID or a utility bill. And only two months of assistance will be awarded.

"If families are in more trouble going forward, they would be referred to our regular community service agency program for further assistance to be able to work with those families going forward," Longoria said.

Eddie Anaya, a member of **Valley Interfaith**, asked commissioners during the public comment section of the meeting to consider raising the program's funding to \$25 million.

"In just over three months, as of May 18, 2020, the Texas Workforce Commission reported 25,667 residents in Hidalgo County lost their job and filed for unemployment," Anaya said. "Then there's the other countless taxpayers and residents from Hidalgo County who are ineligible for unemployment, insurance or CARES Act benefits. Valley Interfaith is proposing that you help these families through a renter's assistance program."

Joe Hinojosa, a Valley Interfaith leader from Holy Spirit Church in McAllen, said the pandemic has been “incredibly painful” and noted that nearly 40% of Hidalgo County residents are uninsured.

Through the nonprofit, he also urged commissioners to increase funding for the Indigent Health Program. They are currently investing \$6.1 million, Hinojosa said, urging them to increase it to \$15.3 million, or 8% of the county’s total budget. Hinojosa also suggested commissioners loosen that program’s restrictions and allow families that are at 100% or below the federal poverty line to apply for healthcare assistance, as opposed to the current cutoff at 30%.

Precinct 3 Commissioner Joe Flores, who has been praised for his vote last week opposing the county’s plan to only share 44 percent of the funds with local municipalities, asked about increasing the funding for the Mortgage and Rent Relief Program.

Cantu replied that the county will begin with \$7.5 million and will learn from the program and adjust it as it unfolds.

“And if we still have money later on, which I hope we do, we’ll continue to add to this program as it works,” Cantu said.