



Best Practice Recommendations for Deep South Rental Assistance Programs

The recently announced \$25 billion in Emergency Rental Assistance Funds coming from U.S. Treasury, is a good first step in providing critical relief to renters struggling to stay in their home. As more than \$1.4 billion dollars comes to the Deep South, it is critical for state and local governments setting up the program to ensure it reaches and can be accessed by people and communities hardest hit by COVID-19. Policy makers, program administrators and advocates should consider the following recommendations when implementing program rules and to ensure funds reach the most marginalized households. States should not put more restrictions on the state level programs than what is in the federal law.

Key Considerations for States and Local Governments

1. Incorporate stakeholder input during the program design and implementation

- Local organizations and community members that already provide rental assistance and other emergency relief to low-income communities have deep expertise and will contribute to the successful distribution of the funds.
- Program administrators should convene a regular working group of stakeholders, from service providers, landlords, and tenant groups, to walk through the program to troubleshoot and problem solve in real time and to ensure the effective and equitable distribution of the available funds.

2. Ensure funds reach the most distressed households:

- Ensure the lowest income households can access the relief:
 - In addition to the statutory guidelines of serving people below 80% area median income and prioritizing people with less than 50% AMI, programs should particularly target households with the lowest incomes of less than 30% AMI.
- Ensure relief reaches hardest hit communities:
 - Target emergency rental assistance to areas with high shares of housing instability, job loss, and populations disproportionately impacted economically by the pandemic, including communities of color. A helpful tool in identifying these areas is the locator tool from the Urban Institute.
- Ensure equity in distributing the funds:
 - Use methods beyond first-come, first-serve which will advantage more resourced tenants and landlords over those who are less likely to have access to the internet or may need help applying. For example, consider the use of rolling deadlines combined with a weighted lottery method for each period.

3. Ensure people can navigate the application process:

- Ensure the application is accessible:
 - Write program information and applications in simple language absent of jargon and complicated language. Provide program information and applications in multiple languages. Provide multiple ways for tenants to submit applications, including on-line and through regular mail, and include a paper and telephone option for tenants with limited internet access.

- Provide help to those who need it:
 - Provide intake and technical assistance, which is possible due to the fact that 10% of the funds can be used by state and local governments for case management and administrative costs.
 - Streamline documentation requirements:
 - In addition to a simplified, accessible application, program administrators should rely on self-certification where possible. For documentation of housing instability, programs should not require an eviction notice, as often it is too late and people should be able to receive help well before the process even commences.
 - Distribute program information through a wide range of channels:
 - This could include on-line, community organizations, social service agencies, and 2-1-1 referral services.
- 4. Ensure maximum flexible uses of the assistance funds:**
- Funds may be used for past due, current and future rent and past due and current utility costs and other housing related costs dating back to March 13, 2020. Past due rent that puts someone at risk of eviction must be prioritized first.
 - Funds may cover 12 months of rent, with an additional three months if necessary to ensure housing stability.
- 5. Ensure Landlord Accountability:**
- These funds contribute to the stabilization of entire communities by helping people stay housed in the midst of the global pandemic and by avoiding the long-term financial consequences of eviction.
 - Program design should ensure participating landlords contribute to these broader goals by including elements of accountability such as:
 - Promising not to move forward with an eviction for a specified length of time;
 - Willing to accept funding equating to partial rent as payment-in-full;
 - Forgiving back rent not covered by the program; and/or
 - Waiving late fees.
- 6. Incorporate reporting requirements in program design:**
- The federal statute requires state and local government to report on the demographics of the fund recipients. Program administrators should ensure these reporting requirements are captured on the front end during the application for funds.
 - In addition, program administrators should review and make public aggregate summary reports through the program, of how much money is being deployed, to which demographic groups, and geographic locations (at least by county), to assess whether adjustments need to be made during the process to ensure the equitable distribution of the funds.

Additional Resources for More Information:

- US Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance Program:
 - Overview: <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/cares/emergency-rental-assistance-program>
 - FAQ's: https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/ERA-Frequently-Asked-Questions_Pub-1-19-21.pdf
- Resources from the National Low Income Housing Coalition:
 - Best Practices for Implementation: <https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Best-Practices-for-State-and-Local-Emergency-Rental-Assistance-Programs.pdf>
- Urban Institute Need Locator:
 - <https://www.urban.org/features/where-prioritize-emergency-rental-assistance-keep-renters-their-homes>