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Funding allows North Dakota to enhance its rent relief program to help more households
Once fully implemented, it will help prevent evictions and build greater financial stability.

BISMARCK, N.D. – In the final days of the recent North Dakota legislative session, lawmakers authorized access to almost \$352 million in federal resources to transform the state’s Emergency Rent Bridge (ERB) into a more comprehensive rental assistance program. Called ND Rent Help, the program will aid more North Dakotans with the goal of helping restore their economic well-being and housing stability.

Phase one of ND Rent Help was implemented June 1, 2021, and replaces the state’s Emergency Rent Bridge. According to the North Dakota Department of Human Services (DHS), this new, enhanced program can now assist households at higher income levels and for a longer period of time. The program’s income eligibility was increased from 60% of area median income (AMI) to 80% of AMI, which equals an annual income of up to \$80,000 for a family of four depending on the county in which they are located. The assistance terms were also extended from six months to up to 12 months.

To participate, at least one member of the household must have qualified for unemployment or have experienced a reduction in income during the pandemic, and be behind in rent or at risk of homelessness or housing instability. Households with incomes below 50% of AMI will receive priority. Renters can begin the application process at <https://portalapps.nd.gov/dhsps/emergency-rent>.

“If an individual or family has struggled to pay their rent, we really encourage them to consider applying,” said Jessica Thomasson, DHS executive policy director for family stability. “If they didn’t qualify for emergency rent assistance before, they need to know that this is a new program with different criteria.”

In partnership with North Dakota Housing Finance Agency, DHS is developing a streamlined program that, when fully implemented later this fall, will feature a new online portal, application assistance, help with rent and mortgage costs, and other support leading to greater housing and financial stability for participating North Dakota households.

In addition to assisting the new households, Thomasson said the state team is reaching out to the ERB’s participating renters and housing providers to help assure a smooth transition between programs for existing program participants still in need of rental assistance.

Created at the peak of the pandemic primarily with federal CARES Act funding, ERB has assisted about 2,100 North Dakota households who were behind in their rent, providing a total of \$5.4 million in rental assistance directly to rental housing providers.

“Before the pandemic, about one in three North Dakota renters paid more than 35 percent of their gross income for rent. The pandemic has worsened the housing cost burden for many,” Thomasson, said. “The ND Rent Help program will help renters and housing providers meet immediate financial needs while also addressing underlying causes of housing instability.”

DHS will contract with community agencies to provide application counseling services so that households that do not have internet access or who may otherwise struggle to complete their application can successfully apply. Housing facilitator services will also be offered later this year to assist participating households in navigating other housing challenges. Their work will be supplemented with financial planning and other community programs and resources that promote ongoing financial stability. In addition, neutral mediation services will be available to help renters and housing providers resolve conflict.

There are currently 117,556 rental units in North Dakota according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Thomasson said the new program may be able to serve as many as 15,000-25,000 North Dakota households.

The ND Rent Help program follows U.S. Treasury Department guidelines. A companion program to help qualifying North Dakota homeowners with housing-related costs is expected to be available this fall.

To learn more about ND Rent Help, visit www.nd.gov/dhs/info/covid-19/rent-help.html.

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