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ND Rent Help program and local agencies team up to address homelessness

More individuals experiencing homelessness are being connected to housing

BISMARCK, N.D. – Together, the North Dakota Department of Human Services and its state and local partners made measurable progress in addressing and preventing homelessness and promoting housing stability in 2021 – the second year of the pandemic.

The ND Rent Help program recently served its 4000th household, and almost 1,700 housing and utility providers across the state have received payments on behalf of renters who had fallen behind or were struggling to pay their rent and/or utilities.

Through the state's emergency rental assistance program, the department provided \$18 million in rent and utility assistance from May 2020 through December 2021.

In December 2021, the state distributed a monthly record \$2.36 million through ND Rent Help in rent and utility relief. Working with local agencies, the department also committed \$1.5 million in 2021, including \$800,000 in December alone, toward the housing needs of individuals experiencing homelessness.

As of last week, 351 households from across the state who were experiencing homelessness have applied for or been approved by the ND Rent Help program.

Building the ND Rent Help program and scaling it up in only a few months has involved a host of partners. Early in the pandemic, the department began working with North Dakota Housing Finance Agency, the Office of Management and Budget, North Dakota Information Technology and community-based organizations across the state to offer rent assistance before dedicated federal funding became available. The state also supported local community efforts addressing the quarantine, isolation and other service needs of people experiencing homelessness.

The department administers the ND Rent Help program, reviews applications and pays providers. Its 17 contracted community partners do outreach, help North Dakotans apply for rent help and find housing, and help resolve housing providers' concerns.

Together they prioritize households in crisis, including those experiencing homelessness and those facing eviction, while serving other North Dakotans who are struggling financially.

"Individuals and families who are homeless or frightened of losing their housing come to us, and we are able to reduce barriers and help them. ND Rent Help is helping prevent homelessness," said Cody Severson of the Community Uplift Program, a housing services partner agency.

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“As a partner, we have done many community engagement activities in our region. No one communication approach reaches all those we want to reach: renters, landlords, utility providers, the public, and community partners that can refer people,” said David Klein, executive director, Great Plains Housing Authority. “We continually do outreach to let people know we can help them sign up for rent relief. There are a lot of needs out there, and the ND Rent Help program can help.”

Department Executive Policy Director Jessica Thomasson said the department is working to improve application and payment processing times, which were temporarily disrupted when the new mobile-friendly application portal was launched in mid-October to early November.

“While ND Rent Help has never stopped issuing payments to housing providers, the transition did create a short-term backlog of applications that we are working through,” Thomasson said. “Our team has been working overtime, and we are onboarding additional temporary staff to enhance both our contact center and eligibility review teams to speed timeliness.”

Website content updates are planned, as well as training videos to help renters apply and housing and utility providers register more easily and complete the steps for accepting direct payments.

Supplements Existing Housing Support

ND Rent Help is intended to augment the low-income housing resources that were available in North Dakota pre-pandemic, such as Housing Choice Vouchers, formerly known as Section 8. North Dakota has approximately \$200 million in federal emergency rent assistance (ERA) funding to support housing stability needs and benefit about 15,000 renters over the next three years.

As context, the Housing Choice Voucher program currently serves about 7,000 families in North Dakota, with annual budget authority of \$40 million. Department of Housing and Urban Development and USDA Rural Housing Service project-based vouchers also provide millions of dollars in rent assistance per year in North Dakota.

How to get help

ND Rent Help can provide up to 12 months of rent and utility assistance to households with incomes up to 80% of area median income, which equals an annual income of \$68,000 - \$79,000 for a family of four depending on the county in which they live. Households must also have received unemployment benefits or have experienced financial hardship due to the pandemic since March 13, 2020; and be at risk of housing instability or homelessness due to housing-related costs. To learn more and apply, visit www.applyforhelp.nd.gov/nd-rent-help.

A list of community agencies approved to provide application counseling services is online at <https://www.applyforhelp.nd.gov/application-counselors>.

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