



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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STATE PROGRAM PROVIDES RELIEF TO FAYETTE RESIDENTS

Uniontown, PA – A new state program designed to deliver rapid financial relief to Fayette County residents launched this month.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf recently announced the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) will use federal funds allocated through the U.S. Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 for distribution to families facing risk of eviction or loss of utility service.

Fayette County received an \$8.5 million ERAP grant to directly assist its citizens. The Fayette County Board of Commissioners, Fayette County Community Action Agency and Fayette County Housing Authority are working in partnership to administer the funds.

“With thousands of COVID-19 vaccines administered to Pennsylvanians every day, we are starting to see the light at the end of this year-long tunnel, but we must remain focused on the fact that so many of our neighbors are still struggling to cope with the pandemic’s economic fallout,” Wolf said. “Millions of Pennsylvania households are less financially secure today than they were a year ago because a pandemic stole jobs and income from Pennsylvania workers. The ERAP is designed to provide housing security and utility assistance for these families and individuals so that they can focus on caring for their loved ones, getting back to work and healing from this traumatic experience.”

Community Action Agency Director of Customer Service Rita Masi said the program is so important to Fayette County, due to residents’ ongoing struggle to remain stably housed during the pandemic.

“It’s a ton of money for the county, so the impact is twofold,” Masi said. “It’s going to help our tenants stay housed, as well as help their landlords collect the rent due to them.”

Community Action Agency Project Manager Heather Pirl said landlords, as well as tenants, have been seeking assistance all year long, and the grant will ease those burdens for many.

“Property owners are unable to collect rent or evict renters for nonpayment right now, so many of them are facing hardships, too,” Pirl said. “They might still have mortgages and taxes to pay on those properties that are usually covered by their tenants’ rent. Hopefully the money paid to those landlords will be directly reinvested into our communities, and our citizens can avoid homelessness.”

Masi said the funding will also be used to provide relief for those who have outstanding utility bills.

“Some people may have been able to keep roofs over their heads, but have fallen way behind on other things. Some of our citizens owe thousands and thousands in utility bills for the past year, because they’ve been unable to juggle both pieces of the puzzle due to loss of income,” Masi said. “This is also going to be a benefit for our citizens to remain in good standing with their utility companies.”

Pirl said Community Action is committed to assisting residents through every stage of the process, which begins with submitting an application via the state's website, www.compass.state.pa.us.

Upon completion of the application, officials will contact applicants to assist in compiling documents, scheduling interviews and other necessary steps to complete the process.

"We ask that our residents please be patient with us, as this is going to be a huge undertaking. Our goal is to serve 1,500 families between now and the end of the year," Masi said. "Collecting all the documentation is the longest part of this, and we hope everyone will be understanding, as it's also the most important part."

"We also want to emphasize that the documents we need are non-negotiable. Unfortunately, the state makes the rules, and we just have to follow them," Pirl said. "If we say we are going to assist, that's a guarantee of assistance, but we have to make sure we cross every 'T' and dot every 'i.' We're fiscally responsible for federal dollars, and we have to make sure they're being used in the best way possible."

Fayette County Housing Authority Executive Director Mark Yaeger said his employees are working directly with tenants of the county's 19 public housing sites.

"We still have around \$200,000 owed in back rents and arrears, so we're working with our residents to complete their applications, compile their paperwork and get their information over to Community Action for approval," Yaeger said. "That amount of money makes a big impact, because if we have to cut our budgets to try to make up for this, we might lose services and employees. We're fortunate that we don't see any of that happening just yet, but we've been trying to weather the storm all year."

Yaeger said approximately 3,000 residents occupy the housing site, and around 400 of those tenants are elderly, making the housing authority's ability to assist with the application process even more crucial.

"What recovering those funds means for the authority is purely financial, but what it means to our residents is everything. It can take a huge burden off them, catch them up on debts and keep them current," Yaeger said. "We strive to maintain 98 percent occupancy at all times, and you just can't do that if you have to evict families. We want to help them maintain their livelihoods."

Through ERAP, households may be eligible for up to 12 months of assistance to cover past-due or future rental and/or utility payments. Residential tenants can apply for themselves or a landlord/utility provider can apply on behalf of a current tenant.

Additionally, landlords do not have to agree to participate in the program for tenants to receive assistance. For more information about ERAP, including a full list of requirements, visit www.dhs.pa.gov or contact the Fayette County Community Action Agency at 724-437-6050.

"COVID brought everything to a standstill, and folks in Fayette County are still struggling a year later because their jobs never came back or came back with less hours and less money," Masi said. "This is going to be a lengthy process, but we're grateful for the opportunity to help our communities get back on track."

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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For more information, contact Kristi Rooker Kassimer, Public Relations Specialist, at 412-691-0262, kkassimer@fayettecountypa.info or Kaylie Moore, Community Relations Coordinator, at 724-430-1200 Ext. 1611, kmoore@fayettepa.org.