

As rental housing providers, tenant advocates and tenants, we write to ask that you support efforts to provide \$100 billion in federal funding for a national residential rent relief fund.

Virginia, like the rest of the country, is experiencing unprecedented numbers of unemployment claims, totaling nearly 500,000 for the five-week period beginning March 21st.¹ Over twenty percent of these unemployment claims were filed by food preparation and service workers, and more than eleven percent by office and administrative workers. Both groups of workers tend to include high numbers of renters. According to the University of California at Berkeley, over forty percent of Virginia renter households with at least one member working in these and other industries immediately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis are rent-burdened.² Because these renters had been paying more than thirty percent of their income towards rent and utilities, they are unlikely to have savings and thus very likely to be at risk of eviction. According to the Berkeley data, renters in this category have annual median household incomes under \$30,000.

When the amount of rent owed by this rent-burdened group is added to that owed by the rest of the Virginia renter households most likely impacted by COVID-19 layoffs, the total monthly rent owed is a staggering \$220 million.³ Thankfully, housing providers have thus far reported lower, but still significant, lost rental income. Our fear is that the amount of rent that cannot be paid by unemployed Virginians in May, June and beyond will meet or exceed that \$220 million. If that happens, it could result in tens of thousands of Virginians being evicted, and will make it difficult if not impossible for housing providers to pay their mortgages. Not only would this be economically and emotionally devastating for Virginians, it could also exacerbate the current public health crisis by preventing renters who test positive for COVID-19 from being able to self-isolate.

We therefore urge you to do all you can to create a robust rent relief program for renters who face financial hardships during the COVID-19 emergency, with protections for renters and housing providers. Specifically, we ask you to support the request for \$100 billion in federal dollars to fund the program, and ensure that the program has mandatory tenant protections including prohibitions on: charging late fees, issuing pay or quit notices, and filing eviction cases in court. We also ask that you make the program available to any residential tenant who has experienced a COVID-19 related loss of income used to pay rent, regardless of whether the income lost was that of the tenant or a family member who previously provided financial

¹ April 23, 2020 press release, Virginia Employment Commission.

² www.ternercenter.berkeley.edu, last accessed on April 27, 2020.

³ Terner Center at Berkeley, see note 2.

support to the tenant's household, and regardless of whether the income lost was from self-employment or due to an inability to find new employment once the COVID-19 crisis hit. Finally, we ask that any residential rent relief be made available for tenants to pay rent arrears as well as ongoing rent.

Thank you for all you are doing to protect tenants and housing providers during this unprecedented public health crisis.

Sincerely,



Heather M. Raspberry, Executive Director

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