

HOUSING ASSISTANCE

Texans looking to tap \$1 billion in stimulus money for rental assistance can apply for aid through the state, **beginning Monday 2/15/21.**

The state created the program to administer rental assistance funds allocated under the most recent COVID-19 stimulus bill passed by Congress in December.

Applications for assistance open at 8 a.m. Monday 2/15 and can be submitted online at texasrentrelief.com or by calling 1-833-9TX-RENT (1-833-989-7368). The phone line will be available Monday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., according to the state.

When The Dallas Morning News contacted the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs on Tuesday, it reached a voicemail service that said the agency was experiencing an increased volume of calls.

To qualify for assistance, applicant households must have an income below 80% of the median income in their area. The state agency said it will prioritize funding for households at or below 50% of median income level and those in which one or more members have been unemployed for at least 90 days.

A household of three in Dallas earning \$38,800 a year or less would qualify for prioritized funding, according to the agency's definition of median income. A Dallas household of three earning up to \$62,100 would meet the threshold to qualify, but would not be considered part of the priority group.

The state recommends that renters in the priority group apply before Feb. 28. It will work on getting payments to those applicants first, according to the agency.

Dallas-Fort Worth had the third-highest level of housing insecurity among major U.S. metros behind only New York and

Detroit, according to a U.S. Census survey from January. More than 1 in 10 D-FW residents said they are behind on rent or mortgage payments or aren't confident they'll be able to pay next month's rent or mortgage on time.

Under the program, renters will also need to have qualified for unemployment assistance or verify that they've experienced a reduction in income, incurred significant costs or experienced financial hardship during the pandemic.

The state plans to assess each applicant's eligibility and notify them through a yet-to-be-launched online dashboard. If renters believe they were incorrectly denied assistance, they'll be able to appeal that decision.

Texas also is encouraging landlords to apply for assistance on behalf of their renters. The program is only meant for renters and does not provide funding for those struggling with mortgage payments.

Renters can request funding for past due rent, utility and home energy expenses dating back to March 13, 2020. Qualifying renters are also able to request assistance for those same expenses up to three months into the future, according to the state housing agency's website.

Covered utility expenses include electricity, gas, water and sewer, trash removal and energy costs. Telephone, cable, and internet service costs are not covered.

Landlords submitting for rental assistance on behalf of their tenants must prepare several documents including government-issued ID, a rental or lease agreement, completed IRS form W-9, household certification form and household income documentation.

The program will attempt to reach the landlord in the application process, but tenants can still apply independently of their landlords for assistance even if a landlord or utility provider refuses to enroll in the program, according to the state.

However, tenants with landlords or providers that refuse to participate in the program will have to wait longer to receive assistance. That's because money won't be disbursed to a tenant until after a three-week period in which the state will attempt to reach the landlord or utility provider, according to the housing agency.

The state plans to disburse funding directly to the utilities and landlords, unless those parties refuse to accept the payment, in which case funds will go directly to the tenant, according to the state. Payments to landlords will happen through direct deposit, and payments to tenants will be made through direct deposit or by check for those without a bank account.

On its website, the state also said tenants already involved in an eviction proceeding can still apply for assistance. And tenants who may be behind on utilities but not rent, or vice versa, can apply for assistance as well.

Renters should prepare:

- Government ID
- Copy of lease agreement
- Notices of late payment or eviction notice if applicable
- Copies of past due bills
- Income documentation for all household members

Landlords should prepare:

- Government ID
- Lease agreements for applicable tenants
- Authorized representative proof if applying on behalf of a condominium
- Completed IRS form W-9
- Household certification form
- Household income documentation

SOURCE: Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs