

# Emergency Rent and Utility Assistance Program Design and Implementation

## A Quick Guide for Local Governments on Challenges and Lessons Learned

### Summary

Orange County's **Emergency Housing Assistance (EHA)** program began in 2017 and scaled up significantly in spring of 2020 in response to the pandemic.

In administering EHA, the Orange County Housing and Community Development Department (OCHCD) has identified eight key "lessons learned":

1. Partner with your local homeless Continuum of Care
2. Partner with local governments, nonprofits, and Public Housing Authority
3. Think about racial equity and language access
4. Use a low-barrier and trauma-informed approach
5. Staff up and set up technology infrastructure
6. Proactively engage landlords
7. Prepare for program analysis
8. Partner with your local Legal Aid

### Background and Timeline

The Orange County, North Carolina Housing and Community Development Department (OCHCD) has administered an emergency rent assistance program since it was created by the Orange County Board of Commissioners in 2017. Originally called the Risk Mitigation and Housing Displacement fund, it was seeded with \$75,000 of local funds, of which \$26,250 was dedicated to "Housing Stabilization" including emergency rent, utility, and security deposit assistance.

The Housing Stabilization fund was not heavily used for the first few years – only 26 households were assisted in 2019. The Towns of Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and Hillsborough also administered similar funds that assisted residents in need with rent payments, but all four funds had separate guidelines and processes that could be confusing and cumbersome to navigate.

At the start of 2020, the Towns and the County set about combining resources for rent and utility assistance and streamlining the guidelines

and application process into one consolidated program. The combined program was named the **Emergency Housing Assistance (EHA)** fund. EHA prevents eviction and homelessness by providing flexible funds to help low-income residents access or maintain stable housing. Eligible uses include rent and utility assistance, as well as application fees, security deposits, and moving costs to access housing.

In early 2020, OCHCD also took on Coordinated Entry for the community – a HUD-required system that provides assessment and resource triage for people experiencing homelessness or another housing crisis. OCHCD (with input from the Towns and community partners) felt it would be best to leverage these efforts, allowing OCHCD to use Coordinated Entry as a referral pipeline for EHA. Coordinated Entry was rebranded as the "Housing Helpline" to clarify that anyone seeking housing assistance – whether facing homelessness or not – should contact the Helpline.

The **Housing Helpline** connects people facing eviction and/or homelessness who are seeking rent assistance or other services to a professional needs assessment and all available community resources, to include EHA, as well as legal assistance if they face imminent eviction. As the impact of the pandemic became apparent, the Board of Commissioners supported the decision to consolidate the four funds into the EHA program, and approved increased funding for EHA. When the County received Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF), a substantial portion of these funds were also allocated to EHA.

OCHCD's ultimate goals in consolidating the financial assistance programs into EHA, linking in the Housing Helpline as a referral pipeline, and increasing EHA funding were to:

- **STABILIZE** housing with financial assistance
- **PREVENT** eviction and homelessness
- **STREAMLINE** referrals and eligibility
- **IMPROVE** access and efficiency by administering all funds for the Towns and County

In mid-October 2020, OCHCD also began administering Housing Opportunities and Preventing Evictions (HOPE) Program funds in Orange County on behalf of the NC Office of Recovery and Resiliency.

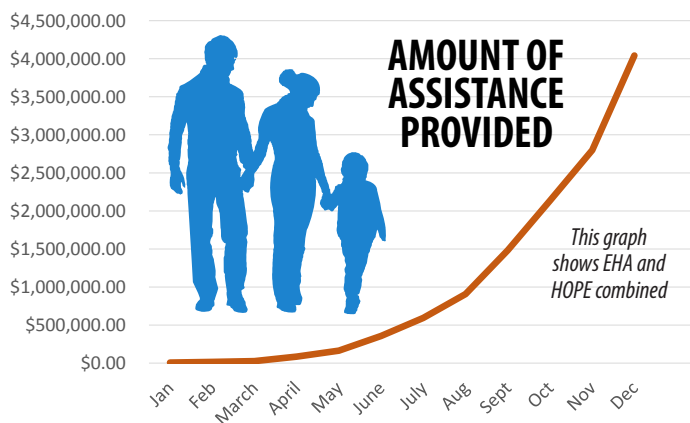
## HOPE Program

- Statewide rent and utility assistance program
- Eligible uses of funds rent and “essential” utilities only
- Administered locally by Orange County Department of Housing and Community Development (OCHCD)
- Funded with Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) and CDBG-CV funds awarded to the State
- In Orange County, \$1.6 million disbursed and 359 residents assisted in 2020; 60 assisted to date in 2021
- Referral system is NC 2-1-1

## Emergency Housing Assistance

- Provides funds for eviction and homelessness prevention
- Flexible housing assistance to help with security deposits, application fees, rent and utility payments, etc.
- Funded with local funds from County and Towns, Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) – and soon, CDBG-CV and Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) funds
- \$2.5 million disbursed to 1,006 residents in 2020; 60 assisted to date in 2021
- Referral system uses the Housing Helpline (Coordinated Entry), plus a network of community partners who refer applicants

## Results



## Lessons Learned

### #1 – Partner with your local homeless Continuum of Care (CoC)

- CoCs have well established community relationships, community-wide communication networks, and a referral infrastructure called Coordinated Entry
- EHA receives referrals via Coordinated Entry (the Housing Helpline), which provides professional, evidence-based assessment, triage, and resource connections to people in housing crisis
- This allows for the proper identification of residents’ needs as well as warm hand-offs to any and all needed community-based resources – to include EHA
- Using the Housing Helpline as a referral pipeline also allows EHA to target people with the highest needs – over 75% of EHA funds have gone to residents earning less than 30% of area median income (AMI) largely due to using Coordinated Entry as a referral point, as well as partnerships with organizations serving people at the lowest income tier

### #2 – Partner with local governments, nonprofits, and Public Housing Authority

- Identify local units of government and nonprofit organizations to serve as referral agencies and/or partner on the program in other ways
- For example, OCHCD found early on that getting payments out to landlords became a bottle neck as the County’s accounts payable process was not well-equipped to handle the constant high volume of payments; to fix this, OCHCD partnered with local nonprofit organizations who served as points of referral for applicants and were also willing to cut the checks to landlords once OCHCD approved the application, and then invoice OCHCD monthly or quarterly for reimbursement
- Local governments (the Towns of Carrboro, Chapel Hill, and Hillsborough) provided staff and volunteers to help OCHCD with application review in the early days before OCHCD had fully staffed up for the program
- Partnering with the local Public Housing Authority can help increase access and utilization of Housing Choice Vouchers
- For example, EHA frequently provides assistance with application fees, security deposits, and moving costs to voucher holders in order to help them use their vouchers and access affordable housing

### #3 – Think about racial equity and language access

- Collect and analyze data – both quantitative and qualitative – to identify neighborhoods in which to target program outreach and identify community partners to engage in the program (for example, the Urban Institute’s Emergency Rental Assistance Priority Index)<sup>1</sup>
- If possible, conduct a racial equity impact assessment of your program and/or organization

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.urban.org/features/where-prioritize-emergency-rental-assistance-keep-renters-their-homes>

- Partner with the organizations in your community serving people who speak languages other than English (for example, OCHCD formed partnerships with local organizations serving Latinx neighborhoods, as well as immigrant and refugee communities)
- If possible, hire bilingual staff in-house as well

#### **#4 – Low barrier and a trauma-informed approach are key**

- Reduce application and process barriers for landlords and tenants – let staff assume administrative work
- To the maximum extent that funding regulations permit, allow self-certification of income, remove ID requirements, etc.
- Make the application as applicant-friendly as possible and be flexible in how applications can be received (e.g., online application portal, dedicated email address, drop box for hard copy applications)
- Have staff (and/or community partners or volunteers) available to help applicants fill out applications
- Provide training to staff on trauma-informed care

#### **#5 – Staff up and set up technology infrastructure (no need to be super high-tech)**

- OCHCD had success hiring temp staff in order to keep program administration in-house rather than contracting it out
- Trainings were recorded and passed along to new staff as they joined the team (to include trauma-informed care training videos)
- Have at least one full-time staff member dedicated to administering the program and managing temp staff and/or contractors
- Set up intake staff with work cell phones in order to create a remote “call center” system (where a dedicated phone number can be answered by multiple staff from their cell phones) and allow staff to communicate with applicants by text (e.g., to receive photos of income documents, etc.)
- Use Slack and Zoom (or similar apps) for ongoing team communications and establish a weekly check in time for all staff to case conference, ask questions, troubleshoot challenges, and provide program updates
- Use free or low-cost tools, such as Trello to track applications through the review pipeline and Google Sheets to create accessible program dashboards (only de-identified data on shared cloud-based platforms and check with your IT for any other potential privacy concerns)

#### **#6 – Proactively engage landlords**

- Low barrier is key for landlords as well as tenants – the fewer requirements for receiving funds, the more likely they will accept them
- Have staff are available to answer landlords’ questions about your program
- Have talking points prepared on program benefits (for example, OCHCD emphasized the cost savings of avoiding eviction/unit turn-over and the important role landlords played in preserving public health through housing during a global pandemic)
- If possible, create marketing materials geared toward landlords
- Reach out to landlords early and often on specific cases – often, when an applicant is facing imminent eviction filing from their landlord, all it takes to stop the filing is a promissory note or call from program staff to let them know funds are on the way

#### **#7 – Be prepared to analyze the program**

- Partner with students and/or researchers from local colleges and universities
- OCHCD worked with several Master’s students from area universities over the course of 2020 on various program analysis projects

#### **#8 – Partner with your local Legal Aid office to provide free legal counsel to those facing an eviction hearing, or who have other housing-related legal needs (e.g., Fair Housing, housing condition issues)**

- OCHCD contracts with LANC to provide an attorney for eviction and housing condition issues coming through the Housing Helpline
- Orange County also used CRF funds to hire an eviction diversion attorney who sits in the County Human Rights and Relations Department

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