

Struggling tenants getting help

New state legislation intended to assist the 231,000 Coloradans behind on their rent

By Saja Hindi

The Denver Post

Nearly a month before the federal moratorium on evictions is set to expire, Colorado passed a few laws that Democratic leaders hope will help tenants who are struggling to make rent.

Among the housing-related bills Colorado Gov. Jared Polis signed recently, one, Senate Bill 21-242, expands the housing development grant program by allocating \$30 million in federal funding and \$15 million in state funding. The money can go toward rent assistance and support services, and for hotels, motels and other properties that can be used as shelters or affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness.

Polis also signed House Bill 211121, which extends the length of time before an eviction from 48 hours after a court order to 10 days as well as prevents landlords from increasing rent more than once in a 12-month period, effective immediately.

Rep. Iman Jodeh, an Aurora Democrat and sponsor of the tenant rights bill, called the bill a huge win for people's dignity and a way to help stave off homelessness.

"It gives folks a chance to maybe pay back rent or get on some kind of plan with their landlord and work something out," she said.

Under SB 21-173, landlords will have restrictions on when and how much they can issue late fees to renters, making it harder to evict. Additionally, HB 21-1329, which was signed into law, sets aside \$550 million of federal funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to address affordable housing issues and creates a housing task force that'll make recommendations this summer (to be reviewed by the legislature in 2022).

And HB 21-1271, also signed into law, creates three grant programs for local governments to use for affordable housing solutions over the next three years.

Colorado is on the verge of an affordable housing crisis that's going to require unprecedented action from the public, private and nonprofit sectors, according to a white paper from the nonpartisan Common Sense Institute released last week.

"This is an enormous problem not just for Colorado, but across the nation and especially because of the continued increase in cost of living here," Democratic state Sen. Brittany Pettersen of Lakewood said. "And so I'm hopeful that the additional dollars that we're going to be focused on this summer for transformational change will really help ... ensure that that if you're working in a community that you're actually able to afford housing in that area."

HOUSING » 6A

« FROM 2A

Although Republicans didn't join Democrats in sponsoring most of the housing bills, GOP Senate Minority Leader Chris Holbert from Douglas County cosponsored the bill allocating federal funding for housing solutions because he wants a seat at the table when the housing task force makes recommendations.

But he believes Democrats need to move away from the focus on evictions as things get back to normal.

“People need to know that with the COVID vaccine being deployed — and I pray that we continue on a positive road — if we’re moving away from the pandemic, getting people back to work and people back to school, getting back to normal, that means people get back to work and they make their rent or mortgage payment,” he said.

Holbert hopes the task force will partner with agencies that have been successful with housing issues in the past, like the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority. He also wants to explore the idea of converting unused commercial space for housing.

The federal eviction moratorium, which began in September 2020, has been extended for what the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says is the final time through July 31. The moratorium does not allow landlords to evict tenants who meet the criteria.

On June 30, Polis extended an executive order for another 30 days that requires landlords to give tenants who are at risk of eviction 30 days notice, rather than 10 days, before taking any legal action.

* Between May 12 and June 7, 231,000 Coloradans — 17% of adults in rental housing — were not caught up on rent, according to an analysis of Census Bureau data from the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. That’s higher than the national rate of 1 in 7 people.

The study notes that the numbers are likely understated because of nonresponses, particularly from groups who are younger, have lower levels of education and identify as Black or Latino.

Senior research analyst Alicia Mazzara noted that the rate of American households that are behind on rent is still above 10 million people, but lower than the peak of 15 million in late January.

“People of color, particularly families with children, have consistently been more likely to report difficulty making rent during the pandemic,” she wrote in the report.

Saja Hindi: 303-954-3379, shindi@denverpost.com or @bysajahindi

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