

Gov. Wolf Calls for Legislative Action to Help Homeowners and Renters Avoid an Eviction Cliff



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Harrisburg, PA – With rent and mortgage debt mounting for hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians, Governor Tom Wolf is calling on the General Assembly to fix a state relief program to prevent many families from becoming homeless and enact a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures until the end of the year. The governor was joined today by legislators and housing advocates at a press conference in Lancaster County.

“Pennsylvania is still racing toward an eviction cliff when thousands of families will face months of unpaid rent and fees,” said Gov. Wolf. “We must address the mounting rent debt to help tenants stay in their home and allow landlords to pay their mortgages.

“If the legislature does not act to fix the state’s relief program, even more families may be facing homelessness on Jan. 1, during the coldest time of the year. That would be terrible for families and will strain local social services and taxpayers that are already stretched to the limit by the pandemic.”

Legislation is needed to ensure people have a stable place to live after the governor’s executive order pausing evictions and foreclosures expired on Aug. 31. The governor signed the orders on May 7 and July 9 as a Pennsylvania Supreme Court eviction moratorium expired in May. The state’s Emergency Services Code does not allow the governor to provide further relief related to temporary housing.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention halted some rental evictions nationwide until Dec. 31, however some tenants and all homeowners are still at risk. It is a temporary Band-Aid that does not stop foreclosures or help landlords who are struggling to pay mortgages and local property taxes. Nearly 400,000 Pennsylvanians, approximately 17 percent of renters in the state, are at risk of being evicted, according to the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania.

In addition to legislation to pause evictions, the governor is again urging the legislature to improve the CARES Rent Relief Program and provide an extra \$100 million in CARES funding. Enacted in May, the

program provides \$150 million in rent relief and \$25 million in mortgage relief, but is helping fewer people than intended. According to the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, which administers the program and is recommending changes, 16,600 tenants applied for \$31.7 million in relief in August, however only 1,756 tenants were approved for \$3.3 million because of the cumbersome application process.

The governor called for legislation with the following program changes to help more renters and homeowners:

- Raise the \$750 monthly cap on rent relief to at least 130% of HUD limits – In some parts of the state rent payments exceed \$750 a month, therefore landlords decline to participate, leaving tenants without payment assistance.
- Eliminate the requirement that households be 30 days behind on rent to be eligible for assistance – The requirement creates an unfair burden on applicants who prioritize rent and mortgage payments over paying for food, medicine or other bills.
- Eliminate verification that applicants applied for unemployment compensation – The added administrative step creates unnecessary processing delays of applications and availability of assistance.
- Provide landlords and mortgagees the option to forgive the remaining unpaid rent or mortgage payments or allow the balance to be repaid over one year – Offering property owners to recoup balance of payments should encourage participation in the program.

“Our data from July and August shows clearly that demand for rent and mortgage relief is there,” said Bryce Maretzki, PHFA’s director of planning and policy. “If we can work with the legislature to remove some of the barriers that are keeping people from applying, or from qualifying for assistance, then our federal CARES funding can really fulfill its intended purpose by keeping people in their homes during the economic downturn.”

“Every person deserves a decent, affordable, and safe place to live,” said Sen. Tim Kearney. “In a pandemic, ensuring housing stability is not just a moral imperative but also a public health necessity. The General Assembly must act now to help keep people in their homes. Families across Pennsylvania are facing an emergency at their doorsteps, and they are waiting for us in the General Assembly to do our job.”

Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta added, “Pennsylvanians are struggling and we in the Legislature have a duty to act — and do so quickly. This isn’t political, it’s personal. I know what it means to be housing insecure and many families are now gripped with that same fear. I stand with Gov. Wolf in urging the Republican majority to bring our legislative package to the floor for a vote.”

As part of his [fall legislative agenda](#) for worker and family support and protections, COVID-19 recovery, and government reform, the governor is proposing \$100 million in grants to help Pennsylvanians with utility costs. The funds would be divided between the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and a new emergency water/wastewater program administered by PENNVEST.

The Pennsylvania Utility Commission (PUC) recently reported that at least 800,000 utility customers across the state are currently in active termination status and would be at risk of having their electricity, water or gas shut off had the PUC not implemented a termination moratorium at the start of COVID.

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