

UNLOCKING HOUSING HELP

At RentHelpPGH, a communications hub for accessing housing-related resources in Allegheny County, the calls these days from people seeking assistance just keep coming and coming:

- A former waitress in her 60s from the Mon Valley, who is cobbling together temp jobs in an effort to make her rent payments
- Two Brighton Heights neighbors, each laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whose mutual landlord refuses to apply for relief under the federal CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) that would enable him to keep them and their families as tenants while making his own mortgage payments
- A single mother of four in Fox Chapel, recently let go from a well-paying job, who is now navigating a thicket of social services for the first time in her life while struggling to maintain a calm home environment for remote learning

These cases represent just the tip of the iceberg. By mid-November, RentHelpPGH had 650 active clients, up from 264 only two months earlier, following the end of the state's second moratorium on evictions. According to Program Director Abby Rae LaCombe, who was hired to run the call center's team of "resource navigators" in early July, the scale of the crisis is "huge."

With new registrations coming in at a rate of 40 per week, "it's just one call after another," she said.

As a microcosm of a national crisis, the struggle to retain or obtain access to housing in the Pittsburgh region amid an economically crippling pandemic is not only devastating to the thousands of people directly involved but also is exposing deep systemic flaws that affect the broader community, most notably in terms of the vast socioeconomic and racial disparities of the pandemic's impact. Of the callers to RentHelpPGH and its sister centers, only about 3 percent are white, estimates Crystal Jennings, a resource navigator who wears multiple hats within the region's social service community.

NONPROFITS IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION ARE COORDINATING THEIR EFFORTS TO ASSIST RESIDENTS IN KEEPING OR FINDING HOUSING DURING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS SPAWNED BY THE PANDEMIC. BY BEN WECHT



“What COVID did was not create the crisis but make the crisis more stark,” explains Matt Barron, a Heinz Endowments senior program officer who oversees some of the foundation’s sustainability grantmaking, including support for the cluster of organizations associated with RentHelpPGH. “We’ve been engaged in funding around housing for years now, so it’s not a new area for us. But what we’ve been able to do this time is to accelerate [the work].”

That such a ramping up has been possible is owed to the network of community, governmental and philanthropic organizations that have come together to address the local housing challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, collectively donating, raising and putting to work millions of dollars within the space of a few months. Of the Endowments’ own

(Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network), which provided funding to a collaboration of the Community Justice Project (CJP), the Hill District Consensus Group and the Pittsburgh Hispanic Development Corporation to address the anticipated increase in local evictions.

“HOUSING IS HEALTH CARE”

Of course, dollars alone cannot solve a crisis, and that’s where nonprofits such as Pittsburgh United come into play. A coalition of labor, faith, community and environmental groups, the organization was formed in 2007 around the One Hill Community Benefits agreement among the city, the Pittsburgh Penguins and the Lower Hill District neighborhood. Its earliest fights were in the areas of jobs, economic development and water quality.

“We believe economic development should serve and benefit the community,” said Pittsburgh United Executive Director Jennifer Rafanan Kennedy, who joined the organization in 2012 as director of its Clean Rivers Campaign.

In 2015, when Pittsburgh’s Affordable Housing Task Force recommended that the city create a trust fund but no immediate action occurred, her focus shifted. After knocking on tens of thousands of doors, Ms. Rafanan Kennedy and her team succeeded in collecting more than 14,000 signatures to place a referendum on the ballot to start a housing fund, prompting City Council to create the Affordable Housing Trust Fund without taking the issue to the polls. Pittsburgh United then embarked on extensive community organizing to win an increase in the real estate transfer tax, providing \$10 million per year to the fund.

Today the organization, an Endowments grantee, is engaged in perhaps its greatest battle yet. Before the crisis, Pittsburgh had

a shortage of more than 17,000 affordable units, with the biggest obstacles facing those earning 30 to 50 percent of area median income.

“The folks trying to access affordable housing at this level face challenge after challenge,” Ms. Rafanan Kennedy said. “COVID presented another crisis layered on this shortage.”

“The moratoriums have protected many families, but some are still facing evictions or have been evicted. Pittsburgh United has been deeply engaged in local, state and federal advocacy on extension of moratoria and protecting people through keeping them in their homes—because housing is health care in a pandemic, a safe place for us to distance and protect ourselves and our families.”



Anne Grayson, center, of the United Neighborhood Defense Movement, participates in an August demonstration outside the Penn Hills municipal building to protest eviction attempts earlier in the summer at the Valmar Gardens apartment complex where Andre Mobley, foreground, is a tenant.

\$5 million emergency appropriation relating to COVID-19-based needs, some \$400,000 to \$500,000 has been directed to housing support and anti-eviction work.

The Endowments also contributed another \$1 million to the COVID-19 Emergency Action Fund, a pooled fund that addresses a range of issues, including housing. Also making \$1 million contributions to the collaborative relief effort were the Richard King Mellon, Hillman and Pittsburgh foundations. The Pittsburgh Foundation managed the fund and raised another \$5 million from individual and organizational donors.

The work of initiatives such as RentHelpPGH also is supported by a federal CARES Act–related grant through PLAN

PROVIDING LEGAL HELP

Another critical piece of the pandemic-era housing puzzle is providing embattled residents access to the legal services they need to remain in their homes. At the CJP, a nonprofit, statewide law firm that PLAN formed in 1996 in response to restrictions imposed on legal service programs by the Welfare Reform Act, staff lawyers engage in class action lawsuits, administrative legal actions and legislative advocacy to assist low-income Pennsylvania residents.

“Our work is focused on issues that are systemic in nature,” Kevin Quisenberry, CJP’s litigation director, said. “Affordability had been a problem for a long time, and displacement is a trend that’s real and has been happening to a degree in Pittsburgh and other markets. The pandemic has amplified the crisis and introduced a lot of new people to that crisis because they are now at the same income level where others already were.”

Having built a relationship with the Endowments a couple of years ago around the issue of lead poisoning in low-income housing, CJP is receiving additional Endowments support, in part for COVID-related work that will help area residents engage in litigation to protect their rights under federal or state law so they can avoid eviction.

“If we can help 500 families or 1,000,” Mr. Quisenberry said, “that will be a major victory, because we’re working with such a short time frame.”

VISUALIZING THE PROBLEM

To help explain how long-term systemic flaws laid the foundation for the crisis we now face, Carnegie Mellon University’s CREATE Lab provides critical data analysis tools to projects such as RentHelpPGH. Under the direction of professors and spouses Anne Wright and Randy Sargent, the lab—whose acronym stands for “Community Robotics, Education and Technology Empowerment”—uses sophisticated visualization platform software to animate maps and demonstrate trends in the housing market.

Based on the EarthTime project, a CREATE Lab effort that focused on examining the long-term effects of such issues as climate change and deforestation, the software is now enabling policymakers and social service providers to get a much tighter bead on aspects of the housing problem, such as the neighborhoods where evictions are more likely to happen, who’s at risk and what a backlog means when moratoria are lifted.

In a recent Zoom meeting, Ms. Wright and Mr. Sargent used a series of color-coded images of the Pittsburgh region to demonstrate the pernicious effects of “redlining” in America that began in the 1930s to restrict Black families’ access to housing in certain communities. Their presentation revealed the way the practice determined the shape of cities like Pittsburgh. Other maps show the effects of displacements in neighborhoods

like East Liberty and the role of the 2008 housing crisis in exacerbating the current predicament.

“Our desire is to engage with the community and better understand changing needs outside the campus,” Mr. Sargent said. “The Heinz Endowments has just been incredibly supportive in helping us to partner with the communities... The fact that we’ve been able to pivot from historical trend data analysis to real-time, ‘Let’s see what’s happening because of the pandemic’... Heinz has been instrumental in allowing us to do that.”

As various community partners in Pittsburgh continue to advance efforts such as these, the focus remains on the thousands of human lives at stake, and the myriad ways in which housing impacts those lives.

“The effects of waves of debt and evictions ripple out into every part of our lives and our communities,” Ms. Rafanan Kennedy of Pittsburgh United said. “Housing is everything. It is the safety and stability that underpins so many things in our lives. And with massive numbers of families facing eviction, our communities will also feel the effects of this crisis if we don’t take action to protect our people.”

Looking to the challenging months ahead, local organizations and foundations understand that just as it takes a village to raise a child, it’s equally true that it takes a community to shelter a family. But as Jane Downing, senior program officer for economic and community development at The Pittsburgh Foundation, sees it, that’s simply the Pittsburgh way.

“I think collaboration is built into the region’s DNA, and I think it stems from the early collaboration on Renaissance I,” Pittsburgh’s post–World War II clean air and civic revitalization project, she said. “So, when there’s an issue, we come together. That’s just how we deal with it.” **h**

The EarthTime project from Carnegie Mellon University’s CREATE Lab developed visualization models of how the 1968 Fair Housing Act addressed racially biased neighborhood redlining in Pittsburgh to help housing advocates see how they could advance fair and affordable housing now and in the future.

