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Contact: Chrishelle Palay, chrishelle@theHOMEcoalition.org 281.901.0229

Celesté Arredondo-Peterson, cpeterson@organizetexas.org, 713.319.6015

Members of Housing Stability Taskforce Urge Evictions Must Stop NOW

On September 4, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a temporary order to halt residential evictions due to COVID-19. It was presumed that this order would prevent an enormous wave of evictions that seemed to be imminent, given the impacts that COVID-19 has had on families across this country. Unfortunately, this order has barely made a dent in evictions and as a result over 7500 have been filed in Harris County since the order was issued. To be clear, this number represents the evictions that made it to court. There are thousands more that happen well before any landlord files it in court.

As COVID-19 cases continue to spike and the CDC order is set to expire at the end of the month, many of Harris County's most vulnerable renters will continue to have almost no protections from eviction. Though federal, state and local jurisdictions acknowledge this eviction crisis as an unprecedented problem, many of the measures that have been taken to mitigate the impacts of this pandemic have largely benefited landlords and their bottom lines over the health and safety of Houston families.

The City of Houston & Harris County jointly formed the Housing Stability Taskforce in an effort to prevent evictions while bridging gaps in housing stability that have been exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon its convening, the Taskforce immediately recommended the City of Houston pass a Grace Period Ordinance, almost identical to the one Dallas passed. Despite broad support from tenant advocates and the Houston Apartment Association, [Mayor Turner has refused to take action](#) by passing a grace period ordinance to give renters more time to pay rent.

Houston & Harris County received CARES Act funding and dedicated \$80 million to directly pay landlords for up to two months of rent. Houston & Harris County also committed \$60 million to provide households direct financial assistance to use as they saw fit for their families. Despite the great need, less than half of those applying for assistance have received help. Renters in crisis continue calling social service agencies and nonprofits seeking support, only to be told most programs are no longer accepting applications.

Recognizing Harris County has now exceeded 2,500 COVID-19 eviction related deaths and the rate at which households are being evicted, Tenant Advocates recognize conditions are spiraling out of control and drastic actions must be taken immediately. We are calling on the City of Houston and Harris County to:

STOP EVICTIONS NOW.

The City of Houston and Harris County should work together to pass a local moratorium on evictions. The current CDC Order is filled with false hope, flaws and gaps that do not truly provide protections for all renters. This order requires tenants to take action to be eligible, but the federal government has done little to inform renters or to enforce the order. Furthermore, the small minority of renters that file the declaration are often challenged by their landlords and are ultimately evicted. We must take action to protect Houstonians during this pandemic.

PROVIDE CASH RELIEF ASSISTANCE DIRECTLY TO HOUSEHOLDS.

With unemployment benefits and the CDC order ending this month, amidst the pandemic crisis becoming worse, this is immediate and much needed relief to so many area residents. Residents know what is most needed for them and their families and these funds allow them to begin fulfilling those needs with a sense of dignity and humanity. Asking parents to choose between a roof and food for their children is inhumane and morally reprehensible. Families need both to survive.

PROVIDE RIGHT TO COUNSEL FOR TENANTS IN EVICTION CASES.

Over 7500 evictions have been filed since the CDC Order was issued and less than 3% of the tenants facing eviction had legal representation. A right to counsel will greatly increase the chance that families will remain in their homes and have their legal rights protected through the court system. While Landlords have strong legal protections, this provision for tenants will protect families and curtail the current increase of homelessness and lifelong trauma.

PRIORITIZE ROBUST TENANT OUTREACH EFFORTS.

While much focus has been placed on the CDC order, it is clear that most tenants are unaware of resources that could help them or how to utilize those resources. City and County staff must be willing to partner with community based organizations to deeply and intentionally get information to tenants about their options. We cannot solely rely on emails and websites as the main source to connect residents with resources. Our government must be proactive and intentional.

For too long, our government has been driven and controlled by a small, wealthy donor class. Despite an ongoing global pandemic, local elected officials refuse to act. If government was not created for times of crisis like the one we find ourselves in now, what is it for? Now is the time for bold and creative solutions that help Houstonians who are only trying to pursue a safe and healthy life for their families but who continue to find themselves unemployed, laid off or sick. They're all wondering: when help will arrive? We must answer that call. We cannot claim #HoustonStrong if we cannot protect Houstonians from the worst economic crisis of our time.

*The organizations represented here are organizations who do daily outreach to tenants around the issue of evictions. We have collectively had several thousand conversations with tenants in Houston. We make these recommendations as organizations on the Housing Stability Task Force who work in deep partnership with Houstonians directly impacted by the issue of housing insecurity.

Signed:

Chrishelle Palay
Executive Director
Houston Organizing Movement for Equity
(HOME) Coalition

Celesté Arredondo-Peterson
Houston Justice Campaign Director
Texas Organizing Project