

Rental assistance is especially necessary during a public health crisis

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, North Carolina was experiencing a housing affordability crisis. Due to years of underinvestment in public housing, exclusionary zoning codes, and stagnant wages that have not kept up with the cost of living, [nearly half of all renters in our state](#) were considered cost-burdened in 2018, which means they paid more than 30 percent of their income to housing costs. The precariousness of this situation leaves families on the edge of homelessness. In 2016, North Carolina's [statewide eviction rate of 4.61 percent](#) was 2.27 percentage points above the national average. Of the top 25 cities with the highest eviction rates nationwide, [five were in North Carolina](#).

The pandemic has made it clearer than ever that housing and health are inextricably tied. During a time when North Carolinians need to limit their movement and stay home to reduce the spread of the virus, families find themselves on the edge of eviction. One in five renters statewide is behind on their rent, and a statewide moratorium on evictions expired on June 20.

As the state works to stabilize communities and move toward recovery, policymakers can learn from ongoing efforts to provide affordable housing in local communities throughout the state.

Eviction diversion programs

- The [Durham Eviction Diversion Program](#) is a partnership between Duke University, Legal Aid of North Carolina, and city and county governments. The program provides individuals who are facing eviction with free advice and support, ranging from emergency financial aid to legal counsel. Evictions have been avoided in approximately 80 percent of cases.

Bonds to expand and preserve affordable housing supply

- Voters in Durham approved a [\\$95 million affordable housing bond](#) in November 2019. The bond will enable the city to increase the number of income-restricted, subsidized homes in Durham by at least a third.
- The City of Raleigh has plans to put an [\\$80 million affordable housing bond](#) on the ballot for November 2020.

Zoning policy changes

- In Charlotte, the [Housing Charlotte framework](#) lays out strategies for promoting mixed-income developments, which include updating the zoning-density bonus programs and encouraging the inclusion of mixed-income housing through the rezoning process.
- In Durham, the [Expanding Housing Choices plan](#) aims to incrementally increase affordable housing by allowing additional and more varied housing, including duplexes and accessory dwelling units, in neighborhoods near downtown.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, cities across the nation have established rental assistance funds and implemented policies to keep families housed and healthy during this crisis. Direct financial assistance to families — and especially to those who are excluded from federal aid — will be important to minimize lasting harm from the pandemic.

Housing assistance actions related to COVID-19

- **Atlanta, GA:** Residents who live in units owned or subsidized by Atlanta Housing and who have lost income as a result of the coronavirus pandemic are eligible for an assistance program. The city also approved legislation allocating [\\$22 million in CARES Act funds](#) to grant programs preventing evictions and homelessness.
- **Austin, TX:** City Council increased its funding for rental assistance from \$1.2 million to almost \$24 million (includes immigrant and mixed-status families).
- **Charlotte, NC:** City Council approved \$8 million in CARES Act funds for mortgage and rental assistance.
- **Chattanooga, TN:** The City of Chattanooga's COVID-19 Emergency Rent and Utility Assistance Program created a support and stabilization fund for small-business owners and displaced workers.
- **Clearwater, FL:** The City of Clearwater created a rental, mortgage, and utility assistance program to support households impacted by COVID-19. The one-time assistance helps households for up to three months with utility, rental, and mortgage payments.
- **Fayetteville, NC:** Fayetteville is leveraging Community Development Block Grant funds from the CARES Act for emergency housing assistance. Qualified low- and moderate-income citizens may be eligible to receive up to \$2,000 toward rent, utilities, or mortgage payments.

- **Greensboro, NC:** United Way of Greater Greensboro and City of Greensboro Virus Relief Task Force announced that \$457,356 had been awarded to 16 local nonprofits (including five housing organizations) to help people impacted by COVID-19.
- **Hayward, CA:** A community relief fund was formed to receive and direct charitable donations to sustain and protect local residents and businesses during the COVID-19 health emergency; the focus is on those experiencing loss of earnings without paid sick leave or access to unemployment benefits.
- **Knoxville, TN:** Using \$1.55 million in CARES Act funds, Knoxville created a housing assistance program to help nearly 570 renter households and 140 homeowners.
- **Minneapolis, MN:** City Council and city leadership dedicated more than \$5 million for Minneapolis residents and businesses that were hit hardest (includes immigrant and mixed-status families).
- **Pittsburgh, PA:** Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh established a Housing Stabilization Fund to provide short-term assistance to workers who have experienced a reduction in hours and are facing a financial hardship in paying rent and utilities.