

Georgia Rental Assistance Program

Georgia Department of Community Affairs/

Georgia Housing and Finance Authority

Special Needs Housing: Combating Homelessness

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GEORGIA RENTAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM – EVICTION PREVENTION INITIATIVE

RESPONDING TO AN IMPORTANT STATE NEED

In the face of the profound socio-economic challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the State of Georgia emerged as a beacon of proactive and effective response. With the unwavering support of the United States Treasury, Georgia was entrusted with a significant allocation of resources to address the pressing issue of homelessness exacerbated by the pandemic's economic fallout. Through the Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program, the Treasury awarded Georgia a total of \$1.022 billion, comprising \$552 million under ERA 1 and \$470 million under ERA 2. These funds were expressly earmarked to provide relief to Georgians facing housing insecurity -- encompassing rent, utilities, and other essential housing-related expenses.

However, at the time, the State of Georgia did not have a statewide rental assistance program in place nor did it have the infrastructure to create one. Responding to the urgency of the situation, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) wasted no time in mobilizing a dedicated task force of subject matter experts. This interdisciplinary team swiftly devised and executed a multifaceted strategy to ensure the efficient and equitable distribution of rental, utility and housing stability assistance to those in need.

At the forefront of this initiative was the development and implementation of a bespoke online portal for applications. Recognizing the pivotal role of technology in facilitating access to aid, the DCA leveraged its expertise to create a proprietary, user-friendly platform that pre-screened applicants, streamlined the application process and minimized bureaucratic hurdles.

Furthermore, the DCA undertook a comprehensive assessment of the logistical requirements essential to the success of the program. From facility upgrades to technological enhancements and the recruitment of additional personnel, every aspect of the operation was meticulously planned and executed to optimize efficiency and maximize impact. In tandem with these efforts, the DCA established standardized policies and procedures to govern the administration of the Georgia Rental Assistance Program. This commitment to transparency, accountability, and fairness ensured that aid was distributed equitably statewide and in accordance with the highest ethical standards.

DEMONSTRATE MEASURABLE BENEFITS

In summary, the collaborative efforts of the United States Treasury and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs have yielded tangible results in the ongoing fight against homelessness in Georgia. Through innovative solutions, strategic planning, and unwavering dedication, Georgia has demonstrated its commitment to serving its citizens and building a more resilient and inclusive society for all.

Georgia Department of Community Affairs/Georgia Housing and Finance Authority
Georgia Rental Assistance Program – Eviction Prevention Initiative
Special Needs Housing: Combating Homelessness

The Georgia Rental Assistance (GRA) Program serves as a robust and comprehensive initiative aimed at providing continued access to affordable housing and vital services to individuals and families facing homelessness or housing instability. From its rapid launch in March 2021, the program demonstrated its commitment to swift action and responsiveness to the evolving needs of Georgia's communities. Initially targeting areas not covered by other jurisdictions receiving ERA1 funding, the program quickly expanded its scope by August 2021, based upon the incredible demand, to provide assistance statewide, including rental, utility, and housing stability support. Moreover, the simultaneous launch of the ERA 2 program extended critical aid opportunities for landlords and tenants without the strict eligibility requirements tied solely to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program's effectiveness is evidenced by its substantial impact. With over 300 dedicated staff members employed at its peak, the GRA Program efficiently processed applications and managed operations, ensuring thousands of Georgians could remain safely housed. By September 30, 2022, the program had expended its allocated ERA1 funding, assisting over 29,000 households and 8,000 landlords across all 159 counties in the state. To date, the program has expended more than \$850 million under ERA 1 and ERA 2, assisting over 61,000 tenants and benefiting 9,100 landlords across all 159 counties in the state. Notably, the program voluntarily reallocated funds to other jurisdictions in Georgia receiving ERA 1 and ERA 2 funding that were facing resource shortages, underscoring its commitment to equitable distribution.

EFFECTIVELY EMPLOY PARTNERSHIPS

From the inception of the GRA Program, DCA established a partnership with the Georgia Legal Services Program (GLSP) to provide legal assistance and housing navigation support to Georgians seeking to remain in affordable housing during the COVID-19 pandemic. As result of providing these critical services, DCA was able to identify a substantial need to continue to provide these services on an ongoing basis. Many landlords were choosing not to rent to low-income renters simply because an eviction action was filed against the renter – even if that eviction action was later dismissed. This stark reality underscored the need for the GRA Program to expand its efforts to provide legal services in addition to rental, utility and housing stability assistance to tenants to honor the State's ongoing commitment to housing security and homelessness prevention for all Georgians and the vision for the Georgia Rental Assistance Eviction Prevention Initiative was born.

The Georgia Rental Assistance Eviction Prevention Initiative (GRA EPI), launched on July 27, 2023, through a partnership between the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Georgia Legal Services Program (GLSP), and the Atlanta Legal Aid Society (ALAS), represents a targeted and proactive approach to addressing eviction and housing instability among low-income renters in Georgia. The launch of the Eviction Prevention Initiative (EPI) in Georgia marks the beginning of a pilot program focused on preventing evictions for our most vulnerable renters in Georgia. Its primary goal is to mitigate the enduring consequences of eviction records, which can hinder future rental opportunities and exacerbate homelessness. The insights gained from this pilot will serve

Georgia Department of Community Affairs/Georgia Housing and Finance Authority
Georgia Rental Assistance Program – Eviction Prevention Initiative
Special Needs Housing: Combating Homelessness

as the foundation for a long-term eviction prevention program tailored to the rental and utility assistance needs of low-income Georgians within the state.

With a commitment of \$55 million over two years, the GRA EPI aims to provide comprehensive support to tenants facing eviction or housing instability statewide. The initiative allocates funds for legal assistance, rental and utility aid, as well as supportive services, recognizing the critical role of legal aid in preventing evictions.

The annual budget breakdown for the initiative is as follows:

- Georgia Legal Services Program:
 - Administrative Costs: \$2,184,871
 - Rental Assistance: \$12,500,000
 - Annual Total: \$14,684,871

- Atlanta Legal Aid:
 - Administrative Costs: \$1,051,063
 - Rental Assistance: \$12,000,000
 - Annual Total: \$13,051,963

The initiative targets all 159 counties in Georgia, with Atlanta Legal Aid focusing on Fulton, DeKalb, Gwinnett, Clayton, and Cobb counties, and GLSP covering the remaining 154 counties. To access GRA EPI services, tenants facing eviction must complete the intake process with either GLSP or Atlanta Legal Aid directly to seek assistance.

By combining legal aid with rental and utility assistance and housing support services, the GRA EPI aims to address the root causes of eviction and housing instability, providing a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting vulnerable renters across the state. Through this initiative, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs has established a pilot eviction prevention program that will serve as a sustainable statewide model for rental assistance and demonstrates its commitment to safeguarding housing security and preventing homelessness among low-income individuals and families in Georgia.

By prioritizing collaboration, responsiveness, and targeted support, the GRA Program through the GRA EPI exemplifies best practices in addressing homelessness and housing insecurity. Through its multifaceted approach and ongoing commitment to innovation, the program continues to make significant strides in providing rental and utility assistance, legal services and vital housing-related services to those in need throughout Georgia.