

Delivering on a promise. \$100 million in
rent relief in just nine months.

MaineHousing
Special Achievement

HFA Staff Contact
Amanda Ouellette
aouellette@mainehousing.org

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Like so many Mainers Megan's life had been upended by COVID-19 as the pandemic dragged us into its second year. In 2021 Megan and thousands of others continued to desperately watch their losses mount.

"I lost my business so drastically and abruptly, all my savings, and at the same time so many of my support system of family and closest friends to COVID," Megan, wrote in a heartfelt letter of gratitude. "It debilitated me on so many levels, financially, but also emotionally, as it did so many others."

But as the pandemic dragged on MaineHousing was stepping up its game, again rising to the occasion on many levels -- innovating and working quickly to ensure federal aid approved by Congress moved rapidly to where it was needed most.

That urgency kept thousands of Maine kids, our vulnerable elders and families who lost work and income because of pandemic restrictions safely housed.

"Keeping a roof over peoples' heads is critical, especially during the pandemic and during the cold winter months," Maine Gov. Janet Mills said. "I applaud MaineHousing and community action agencies across the state for getting these Federal relief funds out the door, faster than most states nationwide, to keep families in their homes and help landlords pay their mortgages."

Megan's heartfelt message, like dozens of others that came in during 2021, reminds us that numbers tell only part of a story.

"Having an organization like this to help me through, a team so kind and gracious, helping me not feel so alone and terrified through it, has been an extraordinary blessing," Megan wrote. "You distinctively ROSE TO THE OCCASION, when I needed help the most, and have made me feel like I'm not so ALONE in this."

The message illustrates the deep emotional toll and stress, pandemic-related financial problems were having on Maine people.

MaineHousing's rapid response -- our ERA program made its first payments in March of 2021 -- putting Maine at the front of the pack nationally. By the end of 2021 we had helped more than double the number of households we initially estimated would need our assistance. We never knew the demand would be so high.

In another innovative approach MaineHousing decided to use portions of the ERA relief funding to help two Maine non-profit legal organizations, Pine Tree Legal Associates and Legal Services for the Elderly, deliver eviction prevention services with a focus on settling eviction complaints by assuring landlords they would be paid.

"Additional funding for legal aid through the Emergency Rental Assistance program has helped Pine Tree Legal Assistance increase the number of tenants we are able to represent in eviction related court or administrative matters,"

Maureen Boston, an attorney with PTLA said. “We represented 494 tenants in 2020 compared to 827 in 2021.” Boston said of the 827 tenants PTLA represented in 2021, they were able to prevent or delay homelessness in 812 cases, a success rate of 98 percent.

“Emergency Rental Assistance payments to landlords and tenants have helped make that possible,” Boston said. “Previously tenants who were struggling to pay rent had very few financial assistance options. ERA has opened the door to come to agreements where landlords get paid and tenants remain housed in a larger number of cases.”

The rapid deployment of these funds not only helped keep the thousands of Mainers housed it helped keep rental units from being foreclosed on and from falling into disrepair.

“This funding has been absolutely critical to housing stability in Maine throughout the pandemic,” said Brit Vitalius, the president of the Southern Maine Landlords Association. “By supporting tenants and by extension, landlords, Maine families have been able to stay in their homes and landlords have continued to pay their mortgages and care for their properties.”

In a related move, MaineHousing created an informative, in-house YouTube video that instructed viewers on the ERA program and on how they could get free legal help if they were facing eviction. In an unprecedented move, the Chief Justice of Maine’s Supreme Judicial Court, the state’s top court official, agreed to place a link to the video on the court system’s evictions information page, where it remains today.

MaineHousing’s staff used all lines of communication to serve Mainers looking for rental relief. One staffer, Sarah Johnson, fielded countless direct messages to the agency’s Facebook page. Johnson would quickly answer questions from those worried about losing their housing or those confused about the application process and requirements. She served as a direct conduit between Mainers in need and those waiting to help. She frequently and quickly connected people with their local community action agency or tracked down lost or delayed rental relief applications.

Johnson had multiple interactions with more than 156 individual applicants. Those conversations frequently ended the same way – a message of relief and a resounding thank you.

This work too remains ongoing. In March of 2021 when the American Rescue Plan Act was passed into law and President Biden touted, “Help is on the way.” MaineHousing and our partners took those words seriously and delivered on that promise.