

We Can't Go Back: MaineHousing's COVID-19 Response Efforts

MaineHousing

Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

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BACKGROUND

COVID-19 both highlighted and exacerbated Maine's safe and affordable housing challenges. Watching the initial COVID-19 response in other states, we knew MaineHousing would be central to Maine's response to COVID-19. Our organization's innovative spirit and our quick ability to develop and mobilize programs helped Maine avert far more devastating COVID-19 consequences. We transitioned 85% of staff to telecommuting in just a few days, and created and operationalized several programs in a matter of a few weeks. Our multifaceted response began with our COVID-19 Rent Relief Program. We quickly expanded our response to provide additional funding to homeless service providers that includes wellness shelters, operation grants to homeless shelters, and access to hotel rooms for isolation and quarantine. Working with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), we expanded the population served by the hotel program to include immigrant families, agricultural workers, and other individuals in congregate living situations.

MEETING MAINERS' NEEDS

Many Mainers just shy of qualifying to live in affordable developments – or those who qualify but remain on waitlists – were suddenly facing furloughs, layoffs, and reduced work hours. Thousands needed help paying rent and were at risk of becoming homeless. In a time when housing stability is paramount, it was in jeopardy for many Mainers. People who are homeless or living in congregate housing are in an impossible situation during the pandemic. Where do you stay during a stay at home order and the local shelter reduces capacity to keep people six feet apart? What do you do when you need to quarantine and you don't have a home in which to do so? Our COVID-19 response programs helped Mainers in these situations – and helped catalyze new perspectives on how we work toward making sure each Mainer has access to a safe home they can afford.

COVID-19 RENT RELIEF PROGRAM

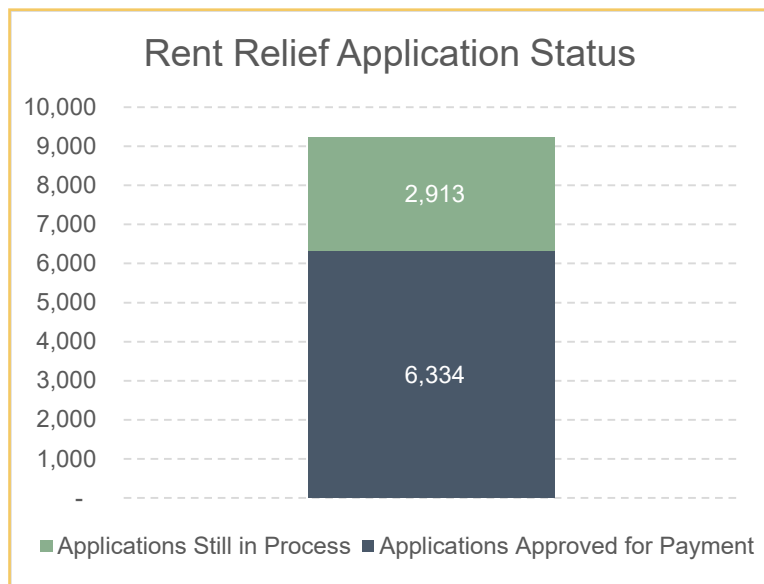
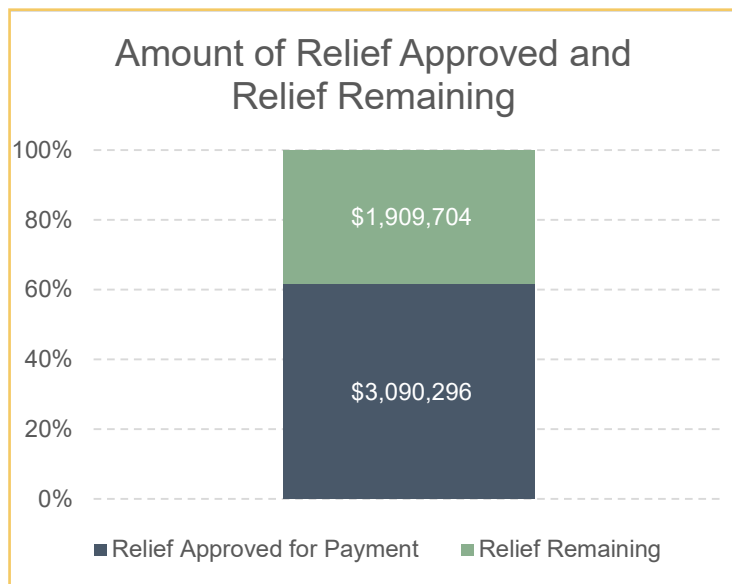
Developed in partnership with Maine Governor Janet Mills, MaineHousing's COVID-19 Rent Relief Program was for renters who could not afford to pay their rent due to COVID-19 related circumstances. We designed the program as low barrier. By submitting the application, applicants certified that they met program requirements. This also meant program administrators could turn funding around quickly. Applicants could also complete the online application by phone. Upon approval, the one-time, up to \$500 rental assistance payment was paid directly to the landlord for April, May, June, or July rent. Landlords agreed that by accepting payment they would not evict the tenant for nonpayment that month. The program gave a brief financial reprieve, provided a bridge to when stimulus and unemployment payments kicked in, and in many cases opened up important lines of communication between landlords and tenants.

MaineHousing funded the program with \$5 million from the Housing Opportunities for Maine Fund. Additional funding will come from other state and federal funding sources. Maine's Community Action Agencies administered the program locally with 100% of funding going to Mainers served. We translated materials into the six most commonly used languages to help ensure maximum accessibility to the program.

It's difficult to measure the extent to which we helped prevent evictions (which may have resulted in homelessness) for many Maine families. We can measure the number of Maine families not evicted for the month they participated in our Rent Relief Program. To date the program has contributed to the rent of more than 5,550 families and is on pace to exceed 9,000 in the coming weeks.

The success of this program resulted in the creation of a similar program in partnership with Maine's Department of Economic and Community Development. This new Community Development Block Grant funded program, which begins in July, will cover rent and utilities in communities that do not receive CDBG funds. As the program continues through the summer and beyond, we will continue to minimize the potential number of evictions for non-payment. Also due to the success of this program, we are working with Governor Mills' office on additional rent relief program options.

Below you will find some data related to MaineHousing's COVID-19 Rent Relief Program as of June 30, 2020. Additional data is available on our website at mainehousing.org/covidrent.



COVID-19 HOMELESS RESPONSE PROGRAMS

Maine’s emergency shelters see approximately 6,000 people per year; an estimated 10 percent of people who are homeless in Maine are unsheltered. Although Maine shelters receiving state and federal funding must meet certain standards, most operate differently from one another and independently within their communities. The COVID-19 crisis has shown how vital it is that MaineHousing, with support and direction from our homeless provider partners, adapt homeless services in a focused, far-sighted way.

At this critical moment in the pandemic, we continue to work with our partners on the initiatives outlined below at the same time as we concentrate our attention and action on what lies ahead. This means, in part, doing the hard work of redesigning Maine’s homeless response around what we really value: help and compassion for some of our most vulnerable fellow Mainers, dignity in service provision, and the belief that all people deserve a safe home. The initiatives outlined below have helped us imagine and begin to develop a new homeless services system. They have also helped us gain buy-in needed to begin to make that happen.

Wellness Shelters: MaineHousing worked with several partners to launch five Wellness Shelters in five Maine communities. These extensions of local homeless shelters help contain the spread of COVID-19 among people who are homeless. Local homeless shelters, Maine DHHS, the University of Maine System, and the Maine Emergency Management Agency united to create these temporary shelters. The wellness shelters together house 178 people who would otherwise not have a place to stay during the pandemic.

These shelters help achieve social distancing for Maine’s homeless population by creating more space for sleeping and day activities. Staff adopted health and sanitary standards such as temperature checks, hand washing, and frequent cleaning. Our budgeted costs for staffing, food, sanitation, garbage disposal, security, supplies, laundry (the costs of managing a shelter) from April through June is estimated at \$2,179,205 for all five wellness shelters – currently entirely funded by MaineHousing. These shelters paired meeting basic needs with healthcare, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and case management.

The first shelter, located in Portland, Maine, opened on April 3, 2020. Through this process, those staying in wellness shelters haven’t had to keep their usual schedule of leaving the shelter at a certain time for a day on the streets. Guests have had the stability of staying in one place (on a cot that remains theirs for as long as they stay) and not having to leave during the day. One wellness shelter director noted, “When the clients don’t have to focus on survival, when they feel rested

and settled, their thoughts clear and they start to think about what's next." One shelter staff member said, "You can touch the gratitude in the air here." Many are getting services they have never received or thought possible.

To date, there have been only three outbreaks in Maine shelters, which lessened the potential impact on our health care system and saved lives. The wellness shelters have made it clear to us that we can't go back – and we are working with partners to move toward a new service structure.

COVID-19 Hotel Stays: As COVID-positive numbers climbed throughout Maine, so did concerns about where people who lack the ability to safely quarantine or isolate at home would go. MaineHousing, in partnership with Maine DHHS, recognized these challenges. We worked together to take aggressive steps to slow the spread of COVID-19 and to ameliorate those special challenges. We did so by securing 120 hotel and motel rooms strategically located across the state to help people in those populations who tested positive for the virus, are waiting for test results, or have been exposed to the virus and as a result had to isolate. We provide hotel rooms for people from homeless shelters, group homes, immigrant families, and agricultural workers. These populations are at heightened risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19, in many cases due to their shared living situations and in some instances their occupations.

In addition to providing space to quarantine or isolate, MaineHousing contracted with shelter providers to provide services including staffing 24 hours per day allowing for any time access for new referrals and intakes processes, case management and housing navigation services, health screenings, and transportation. In addition to these services, DHHS has contracted with Community Action Agencies, Catholic Charities of Maine, and Wabanaki Public Health to deliver social services onsite to individuals while isolating or quarantining including translation, interpretation, and with cultural brokering when needed.

In total to date, MaineHousing has contracted with five Maine hotels for a total of \$1,013,440. The services contracted for as of June 26, 2020 total \$768,141.

Rapid Relief Grants: In partnership with Maine's Statewide Homeless Council, MaineHousing convened a small taskforce of small, rural, urban, and large shelter providers. As a result of the work of the taskforce, MaineHousing launched a grant program for homeless shelters to cover operating expenses due to COVID-19. These grant funds are used for costs associated with responding to COVID-19 that are beyond the homeless provider's operating budget, including cleaning and supplies, appliances, staff time, and other uses. We signed the first 2020 COVID-19 Homeless Provider Grants on March 31, 2020. Applicants were able to request funds for eligible expenses retroactive to March 15, 2020 when the Governor proclaimed a State of Emergency. As of 6/25/2020, a total of \$807,252.61 was disbursed or is pending disbursement through 38 grant agreements.

The funds provided through these grants supported shelter providers in rapidly adapting shelters and the ways they serve their clients in a variety of culturally appropriate and responsive methods. These interventions reduced the spread of COVID-19 in settings where risk for rapid transmission is high. Providers immediately reduced the census of their congregate shelters, meeting CDC guidance for social distancing, because we provided them with funds to rent rooms at local hotels, adapt underused spaces, and provide resources for individuals to shelter in other places (i.e., houseboats or campgrounds). Shelters could provide masks, gloves, and other resources to staff to prevent staffing shortfalls and continue high levels of engagement. Clients were able to remain engaged with their service providers, while also remaining safe as possible and in compliance with CDC guidelines.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our award entry for MaineHousing's COVID-19 response. Please be in touch with any questions you have or if we can provide any additional information!

