

RentHelpMN Resource Eviction Diversion Team

Minnesota Housing

Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

HFA Staff Contact

Josh Nguyen

josh.nguyen@state.mn.us

Overview

When the federal eviction moratorium lifted in 2021, renters in Minnesota still had statutory protections in place, provided they had a pending application with an Emergency Rental Assistance program. In many hearings, however, the parties or the court were unaware of the existence or status of an application, and evictions proceeded, resulting in renter displacement. Minnesota Housing staff partnered with eviction courts to be a resource in hearings, assisting over 2000 households.

Respond to an important state need

In 2020, like many other governors, Minnesota's Governor Tim Walz signed an executive order stopping eviction actions in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In 2021, The Minnesota Legislature created an eviction moratorium "off-ramp" to gradually lift the eviction restrictions and hopefully curb what was otherwise expected to be a surge in evictions. One provision of the legislation extended eviction protections to renters who had a pending application with any COVID-19 Emergency Rental Assistance program, including the statewide RentHelpMN program, administered by Minnesota Housing.

As the eviction restrictions began to lift, Minnesota Housing began hearing from community that eviction actions were being filed against households who had a pending application with RentHelpMN, in violation of the legislation. Some applicants were unaware of the protection and therefore were not raising the defense in court; others were not able to prove their application status, resulting in evictions being granted and families being displaced.

Minnesota Housing recognized that these families in eviction court were the most at risk of losing housing, and therefore most at risk for homelessness.

Innovation

Minnesota Housing staff realized that our agency was in a unique position to support households that found themselves served with eviction actions. For those who had pending applications, we had documentation they could take with them to court. For those who did not have a pending application but who could potentially qualify for assistance, we could connect them with community partners who could help them begin the application process. Minnesota Housing staff created a two-pronged approach to address the problem –

- 1) staff would work with nonprofit partners to identify eviction action filings across the state and conduct pre-court outreach and
- 2) Minnesota Housing would create teams in each judicial district across the state, comprised of legal service staff, court administration staff, a Minnesota Housing employee, and a community partner, to coordinate and provide information and referral services during eviction court hearings.

Pre-Court Outreach

Minnesota Housing partnered with a local nonprofit to identify all of the eviction court filings that were pending for the coming week. Minnesota Housing staff would identify who was in our system with a pending application and send a pre-court email to both the landlord and the tenant with a status update as well as a “pre-qualification letter” that showed the months of rent applied for. This allowed the landlord to cancel the eviction court hearing or acted as proof during the hearing that there was a pending application. For those households who had an eviction court hearing but did not have a pending application, Minnesota Housing staff provided them with the online portal information or connected them directly to a community partner for assistance in starting and application.

In Court Assistance

The judicial district interdisciplinary teams created by Minnesota Housing’s Eviction Diversion Project had never existed prior to the project’s development. Specifically, the coordination and collaboration with the court directly was instrumental to supporting both tenants and landlords navigate the rental assistance process. At the beginning of the project, teams met virtually and emailed regularly to exchange court dates and times and provide information regarding how tenants could attend their eviction court hearings via court zoom links. Teams were also able to report back to each other issues that tenants were having in court, additional information needed to support court personnel, and efficient ways to make referrals to county or legal services staff. In some judicial districts, judicial staff were able to create “Zoom rooms” for Minnesota Housing staff to meet with tenants to provide information during the court proceedings.

The working arrangements of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity for staff from Minnesota Housing to serve as a resource to eviction courts across the state. Since courts were meeting virtually via Zoom, and since Minnesota Housing staff were working remotely, staff who volunteered for the Eviction Diversion Team could attend virtual court hearings in every judicial district, something that would not have been feasible had court proceedings been in person.

Achieved intended results

The goal of the Eviction Diversion Project was to support as many families in eviction court as possible across the state. A team of 16 Minnesota Housing staff members was assembled to provide coverage for all ten of Minnesota’s court districts. Because we had more volunteer staff than districts, we were able to increase the amount of pre-court outreach we originally intended, and ultimately sent emails out to all households for whom we contact information resources and/or status updates on pending applications. We were also able to create a separate email address to take questions from tenants with pending eviction cases if they had follow-up needs. Shortly after we began the project, we heard from partners that some households with pending applications believed they were “safe” because of the law and were not attending their eviction hearings. This had resulted in a number of default eviction judgments. Our team was able to adjust our outreach materials to include information about attending the court hearing, and the number of default decisions dropped.

Members of the team used an easily recognizable profile photo for the Zoom meetings to identify them as affiliated with RentHelpMN and available for questions. During the hearings, staff often had the opportunity meet with renters in a breakout room to discuss their application status and provide information about other resources.

As of April 28, 2022, the RentHelpMN Resource Eviction Diversion Team had provided information or other assistance in 2031 cases.

Provide benefits that outweigh costs:

The program had little cost to operate, utilizing existing staff capacity to complete the tasks required. The team was comprised of those who volunteered to assist based on their interest in the program and flexibility in their workloads and capacity to participate.

Because the hearings were virtual, staff were able to work on other assignments while attending court. No additional equipment or materials were necessary.

Feedback from the courts, legal aid representatives, from housing stability advocates was overwhelmingly positive. Having a representative of the RentHelpMN program present at hearings facilitated the gathering of information relevant to the eviction case. Staying an eviction while a pending application was being processed had dual benefits: renters' housing situation was stabilized, and property managers had a greater likelihood of being made whole on overdue rent payments for renters who applied for rental assistance.

Stories from people impacted:

Renter (from Mankato Free Press story): *"Before the sheriff's office posted an eviction notice on her apartment door a few days after Oct. 12, she had submitted a request. But her landlord was unaware of her taking that step. Maltare didn't have paperwork to prove it until a representative of RentHelp sent it to her the night before her hearing.*

"She was an angel," she said of Crystal Shields, a RentHelp staffer who advocates for renters during court hearings in Minnesota's 5th District. "I cried that night because she was just there. I cried that night."

Renter: *"I wanted to call and thank you SO much for getting my RentHelpMN letter to me in time for my eviction hearing. I wanted to call and thank you with all my heart for having done that. Thank you for everything. My hearing was moved out 4 weeks. The last couple of years have been surreal."*

Minnesota Housing Staff: *"Today we had a lady come in crying to the Rent Assistance room. I had spoken with her yesterday, so I recognized her voice. I tell people they can find me there if they need help. It's good to have the connection and people feel like someone is on their side."*

Attorney representing renter: *"I talked to Gwen this morning, and she was able to get her application in last night. She is so relieved and teared up while on the phone. I can't tell you enough how thankful I am for you and your team. I really appreciate everything you do."*

Supporting Visual Aids

Resources:

News Story:

RentHelpMN preventing evictions, but not without conflict
Statewide program expands efforts to reach as many tenants as possible

Jordan Smith, Mankato Free Press, November 14, 2021

https://www.mankatofreepress.com/news/local_news/renthelpmn-preventing-evictions-but-not-without-conflict/article_9b4f6684-4290-11ec-8345-fb396588e59c.html

Profile Image:



The RentHelpMN Resource team used this image as their profile photo when attending court hearings so they could be easily identified as affiliated with the RentHelpMN program.