

December, 2020

An Open Letter to the Governor and State Legislature of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

We are people of faith in Pennsylvania. We are your constituents.

We are watching a crisis unfold in the Commonwealth, as public health is threatened by Coronavirus, our economic system is unraveling, and our neighbors are facing eviction.

We believe that in this crisis, we have an opportunity to work together to meet human need. The pandemic has shown just how interconnected we are. A willingness to prioritize the basic needs of the whole community and to grow more resilient are among the goods we could hope to gain from crisis.

In the midst of a religious season, we ask you to demonstrate the compassion, mercy, and justice that we claim across our religious traditions, as you serve the people who elected you. To ignore suffering in this time is an affront to our common humanity.

Some unfortunate highlights in our current crisis:

- Our neighbors without work struggle to retain housing. In Pennsylvania, the rate of unemployment was 6.6% in November. Although this is an improvement, economists have found that during a nearly eight-month stretch from February to October of this year, the **rates of claims for unemployment compensation in Pennsylvania were highest for Black people (13.4%), women (22%), and workers age 65 and over (9.5%).**ⁱ
- At least 240,000 families in Pennsylvania (**16-25% of rental households in the state**) are at risk of imminent eviction, even with multiple moratoriums in place. Where shall these 240,000 families go when they are turned out?ⁱⁱ
- Research indicates that **eviction is likely to increase COVID-19 infection rates**, and pandemic policies, including eviction moratoriums and other supportive measures, are key components in mitigating the spread of infection and death.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The Commonwealth received \$175 Million from the CARES Act, yet **the program was hindered** when rental assistance was capped at \$750 per month, requiring landlord forgiveness of outstanding balances. \$750 is lower than the median rent in much of the state. The unused \$108 Million of CARES Act funding was allocated to balance the budget. In what way does this support vulnerable people in the Commonwealth?^{iv}

Now that the current federal stimulus bill has passed in the Congress and has been signed, we implore the legislature to ensure that any available federal funding be allocated in Pennsylvania for rental assistance. It is clear that rental assistance will help both tenants and landlords and may prevent a more profound crisis than the one we are currently facing. Preventing eviction is a primary strategy that can mitigate the

pandemic. Additionally, this time around unspent funds will be **re-routed after Sept 30, 2021, to states/cities that are using the funding**, so state legislators need to prioritize disbursing this money rather than conserving it.^v

We urge you to act rapidly and with the common good in your hearts and minds.

ⁱ <https://news.psu.edu/story/639290/2020/11/18/research/covid-related-unemployment-hits-people-color-women-and-older#:~:text=The%20economists%20found%20that%20during,workers%20age%2065%20and%20over.>

ⁱⁱ https://www.dailyitem.com/coronavirus/thousands-in-pa-face-eviction-when-protection-expires-dec-31/article_96f7c53b-9255-5681-864f-bdf4dd02fd24.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Benfer, Emily and Vlahov, David and Long, Marissa and Walker-Wells, Evan and Pottenger, J.L. and Gonsalves, Gregg and Keene, Danya, Eviction, Health Inequity, and the Spread of COVID-19: Housing Policy as a Primary Pandemic Mitigation Strategy (November 1, 2020). Journal of Urban Health (2020), Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3736457> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3736457>

^{iv} <https://riverreporter.com/stories/pa-passes-budget-cares-act-funding-to-balance-payroll.40782>
<https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/12/pa-misses-deadline-to-spend-108m-in-rent-mortgage-relief-from-cares-act.html>

^v <https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Housing-Provisions-in-Emergency-COVID-19-Relief-Package.pdf>