

MEMORANDUM

Date: Sept 21, 2020

To: Marisa A. Zapata, PhD
Director, PSU-HRAC

From: Lauren E. M. Everett
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Subject: Updates on COVID-19 and disaster response, housing, and people experiencing homelessness nationwide, September 14 - 20.

News

1. [New York City](#) Mayor de Blasio's plan to relocate about 300 single men who were residing at the Lucerne Hotel in the Upper West Side (in response to a threatened NIMBY lawsuit) was met with protest Sunday. The protest began in front of the Lucerne before proceeding to Gracie Mansion, the official Mayor's residence. The mayor announced Monday he was [putting the plan on hold](#) as his administration reviews the entire hotel program and evaluates next steps.
2. Despite the CDC's historic [national eviction moratorium](#), landlords are still filing non-payment cases with local courts. Some landlords continue to use [informal tactics](#) like threatening to lock tenants out of their homes or harassing them with repeated notices on their doors. [Eviction filings from large landlords](#) surged above historical numbers in the days after the moratorium was announced, likely based on the intention to take advantage of tenants who were not aware of the new protections. Sixty-two [corporate landlords](#), who received a cumulative \$60.9 million in forgivable Paycheck Protection loans, have initiated at least 494 eviction actions after the moratorium was announced.
3. [Pandemic Unemployment Assistance](#) requirements stipulate that the recipient must have a residential address, which can present a critical challenge to people experiencing homelessness.
4. [Bay Area](#) advocates report that sweeps of homeless encampments are still taking place despite the CDC's guidance and local governments' moratoriums. Some of the sweeps are related to safety concerns associated with camps placed in close proximity to busy highways, pointing to a dilemma around how to best address these conditions.
5. In [Anchorage, AK](#) a group of homeowners have been denied their request for a petition to repeal AO66, a local ordinance that authorizes the city to purchase two hotels for unhoused Alaskans. The group plans to file a lawsuit and a request for injunctive relief in order to block the sales from proceeding until the case is resolved.
6. [Melbourne, FL](#)'s new Street to Home Bridge Housing program offers hotel rooms with services for at least 30 individuals and families experiencing homelessness. The program

utilizes \$246,988 in CARES Act funding, and is a partnership between several local organizations.

7. The [catastrophic wildfires](#) sweeping across the West Coast have compounded the crisis of COVID-19 on several fronts, leaving thousands without homes and highly toxic air in large sections of Oregon, Washington, and California. [Undocumented farmworkers](#) and [houseless people](#) are particularly impacted. In [Portland](#), efforts to move unsheltered houseless people out of harm's way have been hindered by several factors.
8. *Shelterforce* makes the case for [using hotels as a long-term strategy](#) for people experiencing homelessness.
9. [California](#) Governor Gavin Newsom announced the first round of Project Homekey grants to be awarded to local jurisdictions for creating housing for people experiencing homelessness. The \$76.5 million (out of the total program amount of \$600 million) will go to Tahoe, Lake Elsinore, El Centro, Mendocino, Kern County, and San Jose. [Sacramento](#) announced separately that they expect to receive about \$30 million in Homekey funds for their \$62 million motel conversion and manufactured housing plan.

National Low-Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) weekly call and updates (September 14)

Shannon Singleton, Housing Policy Advisor, Office of Oregon Governor Kate Brown: We don't have an idea of how many housing units have been lost in the wildfires. We've been working with the Red Cross on non-congregate shelter (e.g. hotels), and to utilize congregate shelters that were already in place. We have very bad air quality, so in addition to people who have been evacuated we're working to get people who are sleeping outside into congregate shelters. We're drawing on our networks and associations to do surveys and assessments on vacancies. We don't have a high vacancy rate, so that's made worse in the current crisis. We've made a FEMA funding request for temporary housing and other services. We have a statewide Wildfire Relief Fund that offers up to \$7,000 per household for residents of owner-occupied homes, and we'll be expanding that program. We're currently still under an eviction moratorium that has been passed through the end of this month, and are working on making sure there won't be any evictions at the end of that time.

Q: You're looking for additional non-congregate shelter opportunities for people experiencing homelessness, in addition to evacuees, correct?

A: It's both: with fire evacuees we're working with the Red Cross, and we've already been doing it for houseless people but we're looking for additional resources to expand that.

Diane: FEMA changed its policy a month ago to reimburse non-congregate shelter for all emergencies. It no longer has a strict policy about helping specific populations, it just has to serve the agenda of getting people out of harm's way.

Alison Eisinger, ED, Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness: Things are bad here but not as bad as other parts of the state. In Clark County, which is across the river from Portland, the air quality has been hazardous since Friday. They're seeing an exodus from the south into local

motels in the county, including entire senior homes. This creates a challenge for finding rooms for people experiencing homelessness. Some new hotel rooms have opened and other facilities. The wildfires tend to be worse usually in the east parts of OR and WA, but that is not the case here as there are fires all the way up to the coast. We have a new clean air shelter that opened Friday. It's now full. We had all hoped that the weather and air patterns would shift but it's looking like that's not going to happen. To give you a sense of the need, we have 6-7,000 unsheltered homeless people after our shelters are at capacity, and all of these people are currently exposed to this toxic air. In the space that was opened for the clean air shelter, it was set up to be an assessment and recovery center for COVID so there is really good air circulation and filtering, and germ-resistant surfaces. It hadn't been activated yet for COVID, so the local government is concerned that they don't jeopardize FEMA funding for the center since we're now using it for a different disaster. We're working to ensure that all facilities are made available and kept open. All of our member organizations have done incredible work the past few months with shelter dedensification. While this has been essential, it's only helping people who were already in shelter, and we have done nothing to increase shelter capacity. The multiple crises we're currently facing suggest we need to see much greater use of non-congregate options than local government has stepped up to offer.

Q: You said there are 6-7,000 unsheltered people in King County, so what is the County doing to move people into shelter?

A: 100% of the effort to date has been to move people out of congregate shelters, and we haven't seen an additional allocation of resources for motels and hotels for unsheltered individuals.

Q: And that's the same with the fires?

A: Correct. The air quality is very bad and life-threatening for people with underlying conditions. I have a very strong reaction that there hasn't been more movement on addressing the needs of the pandemic as far as non-congregate shelter. We need a much more dramatic plan to move people now.

Q: As far as that empty warehouse, what is the concern with the FEMA reimbursement?

A: Because the conversion of that space was to create a COVID isolation and quarantine center, the city's legal advisors have cautioned that while they can temporarily use it as a clean air shelter, since that was not the designated use of the funds there could be an issue.

Seana O'Shaughnessy, President & CEO, Community Housing Improvement Program: We serve seven counties in rural Northern CA. Butte County is one of the counties where the North Complex fire is burning. It's important to understand the context of the fires burning, which is climate change, a housing shortage, and COVID. We have several fires that are on record as some of the largest fires our state has ever experienced. It's currently at over three million acres. Our state's ability to fight these have been hindered by coronavirus and the fact that the other states on the West Coast, which usually lend their firefighting resources, are busy with their own fires. The death toll is growing and is much too high at 33 people. I cannot emphasize enough the clear connection between climate change and the escalation of these fires over the years, as well as the hurricanes on the East Coast and increased flooding in the Midwest. What is unique about the North Complex fire is that it's threatening communities that were already devastated by the Camp Fire previously. So these losses are on top of that previous loss, which was 15,000 homes. The loss of housing

compounded the shortages we were already experiencing. Nearly two years later we still have families precariously housed from that fire, and every unit lost delays their road to recovery.

Our PIT count in 2019 showed that our homeless population is comparable to Los Angeles' in proportion. The ability to provide housing is just as constrained. As Sharon shared, COVID is delaying our disaster response efforts. We have no congregate shelters because it's not safe, and we don't have enough beds in local hotels. The smoke and air quality is incredibly dangerous. The pandemic also impacted our early firefighting efforts. So we have this layering of disasters that is just making things worse. Then COVID-19 also impacted our housing generation efforts. We had several housing creation bills that died. Here at the end of the legislative session we have no rent relief, and no housing plan. On a positive note, Project Homekey may end up providing long-term solutions to homelessness. The moment we're in is awful as we're dealing with devastating wildfires and COVID. We can't respond like we have in the past—we have to get creative and take risks on bold solutions.

Q: What resources are needed for the most immediate solutions?

A: The immediate solutions are so thin and our entire state is so stretched. So we can't just move someone into a hotel. There are tremendous resources available through FEMA but they get restricted by bureaucratic red tape. It creates trauma through the recovery process. There are resources if we were just more creative or less worried about fraud on the front end. I don't want this to keep happening so we'd like to change it for the future.

Margot Kushel, Director, Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiatives, Center for Vulnerable Populations, UCSF: We've been dealing with very unhealthy air quality here in the Bay Area. During those days the recommendation is that everyone stays inside. I went for a walk earlier to see how things were and my mouth is still burning. Trying to think about what this means for our large homeless population is just unthinkable. We've moved thousands of people into hotel rooms and trailers because of COVID and at the same time had to de-densify our shelters, so even though we've created quite a few hotel rooms we haven't created any shelter beds overall. Now we're in a crisis upon a crisis upon a crisis. Being outside isn't safe for people who have an underlying heart or lung condition. We're stuck right now between a rock and a hard place. Libraries and other places where people experiencing unsheltered homelessness usually go to recharge their phones etc. have been closed because of COVID, and now some of those have opened with air purifiers, but they're not available for overnight stays. I think now the only way forward is to increase non-congregate shelter options. However these are really difficult to increase on a dime and that's the reality. We need to deal with these underlying conditions (ending homelessness) to have a sustainable society. Right now we need to work on increasing hotel rooms and respite shelters, but we cannot lose sight of fixing the fundamentals.

Q: Is the city working on hotel rooms?

A: I have heard there are plans to open up another hotel. That is clearly what people want to do but it's been a struggle to get these open quickly. The city has been moving slowly to try to open up and increase the number of people in shelters. Before the wildfires the city was working on sanctioned

camps and other outdoor models, but that's of course changed now with the air quality. We're going to keep pushing for more hotel rooms but it is hard to do quickly. There is still some more hotel capacity in San Francisco, but the challenge is getting them up and running with services. Also, the FEMA reimbursement is only 75% and it's not for all of the expenses. The county and state budgets are in terrible places so it's an issue to make up those costs.

Other resources and materials:

1. The [Chicago Department of Housing](#) published a report on how to make their inclusionary housing program more impactful. It includes mandating that affordable housing be built in all market-rate residential projects with more than 10 apartments.
2. The NLIHC's resource page for the [CDC's national eviction moratorium](#).
3. How communities can address homelessness through [housing and justice system partnerships](#).