



## Rental Assistance: Guiding Principles to Serve the COVID Need

The pandemic drove rapid federal, state, and local action to expand Unemployment benefits and housing assistance to stabilize affected populations and the economy. While expanded Unemployment benefits helped initially, the expansion was substantially reduced at the end of July, and these reduced benefits are time limited. This means rental assistance programs are more critical than ever.

Illinois already funds rental assistance programs, including IHDA's [Rental Housing Support Program](#), and the Chicago [Low Income Housing Trust Fund](#). The [Chicago Housing Authority](#), [Housing Authority of Cook County](#) and other local housing authorities also continue administering the [federal Housing Choice Voucher program](#). These are strong programs, but they were not built to deploy 10 times more dollars with lightning speed. A new, efficient design and delivery mechanism must be paired with nimble administration to serve affected renters, and the housing stock where they live.

Tenants who are immigrants or members of other historically underserved groups may be hesitant to engage with government agencies. Small to mid-sized NOAH building owners and 2-4s owner-occupants are also inexperienced with subsidy and may be intimidated by government.

The following highlights specific program features for unique tenant and building characteristics, as well as broader principles to guide a new rental assistance programs for this pandemic. These considerations should drive program structures and outreach that may differ from typical government models.

### Underserved tenants

**Program structure** should ensure vulnerable communities, including undocumented immigrants and tenants in neighborhoods still recovering from the last financial crisis, can access assistance.

- Program application and other materials should be in different languages, with available technical assistance, especially if the application is digital or online.
- Instructions must clarify how different government assistance programs interact. For instance, tenants receiving City or federal housing assistance may be barred from receiving State assistance.
- Outreach must be conducted by trusted organizations to successfully engage tenants, and help them understand available programs and eligibility requirements.

### 2-4s owners

**Program structure** needs to be extremely simple for owner-occupants. Owners who lost income may also be burdened by other bills, including utilities and property taxes. They are likely scrambling to seek out homeowner assistance, and not considering programs to serve renters.

**Outreach** to owner-occupied 2-4s should be similar to outreach for tenants. Door-knocking, and leveraging trusted local groups are key outreach strategies. Investor-owners from out of town will be very difficult to engage.

## NOAH owners

### Program structure and requirements need to be simple.

- Program requirements could reference other existing data metrics. For instance, area income data could be a proxy for tenant income.
- For timely and efficient administration, a lump sum payment to cover missed rent is more efficient than several payments over time.
- One application from a building owner would mean fewer transactions (one per building, versus several tenants applying per building). If tenants do apply directly, optional sign-off from the owner might expedite the government process.

**Timing is critical.** Tenant needs will become worse as some benefits decrease or expire, including expanded Unemployment benefits and [utility moratoria](#). Some renters face several months of unpaid utility bills, and utility bill relief and deferred payment programs may not be enough.

**Eviction prevention.** Building owners should not file eviction during the assistance term, nor hold tenants responsible for rent arrearages, or future rents, that are covered by the rental assistance.

**Transparency matters.** If rental assistance is granted, affected tenants must understand the length of assistance and related eviction restrictions. Both owners and tenants should be clear how the new assistance interacts with existing subsidies or other agreements.

**Engage affected parties early.** Affected owners and tenants should be tapped for input during the program design stage. They will know how to best reach and serve their peers.

**Coordinated communications and outreach.** New programs should leverage the experience and relationships of existing intermediaries, and encourage those intermediaries to work together. Non-traditional allies, like tenant advocates and building owners, could be extremely effective if they join forces to encourage and assist tenants in applying for available rental assistance.

**Build off of existing platforms.** Tenant income verification should have a low barrier, and tenant receipt of other assistance could serve as a proxy for income qualification (SNAP, Unemployment, etc.). Similarly, if government is seeking outside organizations to conduct outreach or other administrative tasks, existing government contracts could be tweaked instead of re-created.

**Subsidized properties may also need assistance.** Some “subsidized” properties do not have rental assistance, and may be the easiest to serve based on existing relationships with government.

## Conclusion

This Preservation Lab report reflects local housing stakeholder insights about rental assistance during the COVID-19 crisis, and how effective program design can better serve the most vulnerable tenants and buildings. While some COVID rental support programs already exist, we hope this Lab process and report help guides future rental relief programs to most effectively stabilize affected households and properties.

The Preservation Lab is co-directed by [The Preservation Compact](#) and [Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University \(IHS\)](#).

## Preventing Eviction: Unserved Households

Absent the federal government committing massive resources to rental assistance, no new – or existing – program will have enough capacity to serve every household in need. Households who cannot afford to pay rent and do not receive rental assistance could face eviction. While this Lab was not focused on eviction prevention, some strategies were discussed.

–The [Center for Conflict Resolution](#) is an objective resource that provides third-party mediators to help tenants and building owners reach an agreement together to avoid eviction. This program is also highlighted in the [City of Chicago's Solidarity Pledge](#).

–Eviction court can be a point of entry for access to resources. A program could use emergency prevention resources to pay past due rent for renters who can document they have sufficient income to pay rent moving forward.