

As evictions spike, here's how Milwaukee organizations are doing what they can to help

Talis Shelbourne

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

June 24, 2020, 3:20 p.m. CT



With eviction filings [jumping 42% statewide](#) in the first two weeks of June — coinciding closely with the May 27 expiration of Gov. Tony Evers' ban on evictions — housing in Milwaukee has become more precarious.

The city has a long history of [segregation](#), [struggling city programs](#), and recently, rising rent. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated these problems by forcing businesses to close and thousands to lose their jobs.

But several Milwaukee organizations are stepping up to help tenants — and landlords — survive.

Anticipating a spike in evictions

Community Advocates, for example, launched the Rental Housing Resource Center earlier this year with partners Apartment Owners Association of Southeast Wisconsin, the city of

Milwaukee, IMPACT, [Legal Action of Wisconsin](#), [Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee](#), [Mediate Milwaukee](#) and Milwaukee County.

Project support is being provided by the Urban Economic Development Association of Wisconsin and funding is from a variety of sources.

The Rental Housing Resource Center created a Rent HelpLine for tenants and landlords who are having financial problems because of the coronavirus crisis. To get connected to rent assistance or other resources, call 414-270-4646, email renthelp@communityadvocates.net or fill out the [rent assistance application online](#).

[Legal Aid Society](#) Executive Director Colleen Foley said the organization started preparing for a spike in evictions before the ban expired. The group works with Milwaukee County individuals whose income is at 125% or less of the federal poverty guidelines.

"We filed a motion on behalf of almost 50 people who were in the pipeline for eviction just before the pandemic hit," she said. "We also wrote a letter to the governor asking him to issue the executive order for a moratorium."

Since then, the society has moved to an [online intake form](#).

Foley said the federal ban, which ends July 25, is only applicable to [federally subsidized housing and backed mortgages](#), which is why evictions have increased so much.

"I can tell you sheer numbers are illustrative," Foley said. "May 25-29, there were 66 evictions filed and the following week, June 1-5, there were 204 and then June 8-12, there were 368. So as you can see, the numbers speak for themselves."

She said the issue has been exacerbated by job losses and failures in the unemployment system.

"The unemployment payments and subsidies have been tied up because we have an antiquated system that at least a decade ago, should have been fixed. So now, a lot of people don't have those checks yet, and it's a perfect storm, unfortunately."

Foley said she is particularly concerned about what will happen in July when the additional \$600-per-week in unemployment payments end.

"When we get to the end of the summer, I'm worried. Then when the weather starts to change and COVID-19 makes things even more perilous."

Organizations such as [Mediate Milwaukee](#) are also stepping in to provide legal assistance. Attorney Joanne Lipo Zovic has been helping mediate tenant-landlord disputes since 2017.

"Our goal is to facilitate improved conversation and hopefully get people to an agreement that they can live with instead of getting to an eviction," she explained.

It's important to keep evictions out of people's rental histories, she said.

"The spike means that we could have a whole lot of people that are going to be out of their houses and that are going to have a very difficult time getting something else. If you have an eviction on your record, it changes your standing in terms of what you can get. There are some landlords that won't even consider your application if you've had an eviction within some period of time."

That period, Lipo Zovic said, can last one, two or even 10 years.

"We do court-connected mediation and (we) are really committed to getting tenant and landlords to think when you run into an issue — an interruption in your job, some financial difficulty of some sort, whatever it might be — start engaging with the process of mediation sooner rather than later."

Eviction prevention can start before a tenant is in trouble



For Social Development Commission CEO George Hinton, preventing eviction is a process that begins before someone ever attempts to rent an apartment.

"A lot of SDC services are geared towards helping people recover and get themselves back into the game of self-sufficiency," he said. "If you have people who don't have a high school diploma looking for employment ... let's skill you up. Let's get you a high school diploma, get

you technical training. Let's make sure that when the opportunity arises, this person is marketable and ready to weather the next storm that comes."

Some of the programs at SDC include "Absolute Advantage," a training program for construction workers and "Chef Start," a culinary program to provide certifications and training for the culinary arts.

At SDC, clients also have access to mental health services, financial coaches and case managers. And on June 8, the commission launched its WRAP, or [Wisconsin Rental Assistance Program](#) to help people pay security deposits, rent, and other housing-related costs.

"We are a community action agency and our mission is to help people move out of poverty," he said. "So we will do that for as long as we're able to do it."

Contact Talis Shelbourne at (414) 403-6651 or tshelbourn@jrn.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@talisseeer](#) and message her on Facebook at [@talisseeer](#).

How are we doing? Fill out this [survey](#) and let us know.

How you can get help

Community Advocates: 414-270-4646, renthelp@communityadvocates.net, [online application](#). More info on rental assistance is available [here](#).

Legal Aid Society: 414-727-5300, question@lasmilwaukee.com, [online application](#). More info on their tenant/landlord services are available [here](#).

Legal Action: 855-947-2529 and 414-278-7722. More info on their Eviction Defense Project is available [here](#) and info on eviction is available [here](#).

Mediate Milwaukee: 414-939-8800, apply@mediatemilwaukee.com. More info on tenants and landlords is available [here](#).

Social Development Commission: 414-906-2700 and 414-963-2684, info@cr-sdc.org. More info on their Wisconsin Rental Assistance Program is available [here](#).