

New Jersey launches website, hotline for people who need housing assistance

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New Jersey renters, landlords and homeowners seeking information on the latest housing rules, assistance grants, legal assistance or help working out a rental repayment plan can find answers through a website launching Friday by the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey at www.housinghelpnj.org.

The one-stop website includes a toll-free phone number, 888-691-3002, that New Jerseyans can call to be connected with Volunteer Lawyers for Justice for legal help dealing with eviction filings, or with members of community group partners that can act as mediators if a tenant needs help working out a deal with a landlord to pay back rent in arrears without going to court.

There's also a field where readers can submit housing-related questions that staff members will monitor and answer or forward to partnering organizations, depending on the need.

The effort was funded with \$1.2 million from the state Affordable Housing Trust Fund and \$1.9 million from the Pandemic Relief Fund, a nonprofit founded by first lady Tammy Murphy.

"Most people right now just don't know what their rights are," said Sharon Barker, vice president and chief operating officer at the Housing and Community Development Network. "I watch the governor's coronavirus briefings, but many people don't do that. Information is power, and people really need this information."

The website will explain in plain language the protections Gov. Phil Murphy put in place to keep people housed during the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, people cannot be kicked out of their homes under a state eviction and foreclosure moratorium through at least June 19, and that could be pushed back to a later date if Murphy renews a public health emergency order.

However, landlords can start the eviction process by submitting filings in court.

Utilities cannot be shut off through at least June 30, and renters can use security deposits to make rental payments.

The state also launched a second round of the [COVID-19 Emergency Rental Assistance Program](#) to cover up to a year's worth of missed rent payments for about 25,000 to 30,000 low- and moderate-income households who lost income due to the pandemic. Families in need can apply to the grant lottery at <https://njdca.onlinepha.com/>, or can use the housing website to work with an expert to help them fill out the application.

Undocumented immigrants are also eligible for these funds, though many families may be reluctant to submit an application to a government agency because they fear being deported, Barker said.

"We will do anything to help and protect them," Barker said.

Renters who owe payments to landlords and want to avoid landlord-tenant court — since court filings can be used by screening companies to make it more difficult to find a new place to live in the future — can use the website to find a mediator, who would work with both parties to come up with a reasonable repayment plan.

The mediator organizations include New Jersey Citizen Action, La Casa de Don Pedro in Newark, Parkside Business & Community in Partnership in Camden, St Joseph's Carpenter Society in Camden, Consumer Credit Counseling, the Affordable Housing Alliance and The Waterfront Project in Jersey City.

The housing coalition plans to spread the word about this new resource by putting up posters in bodegas, grocery stores, nail salons, child care centers, barber shops, libraries and other locations in English and Spanish.