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Franklin County workers guide those in eviction court to help

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Zantell Pitts didn't know it at the time, but last week a new Franklin County program likely saved him from living on the streets.

"I would have been homeless. I'm broke," said Pitts, 36, of the East Side, after his court date on Tuesday.

Pitts is a single dad. He's unemployed, he said, because he cares full-time for a disabled daughter. He owed \$1,300 in unpaid rent and fees and his landlord was ready to evict him. But a worker with a new program at the Franklin County Department of Job & Family Services connected him with services that could immediately help him stave off eviction.

If someone is evicted, too often they become homeless, lose their job or have other consequences that result in them relying on public assistance. It's cheaper, more humane and wiser, county officials said, to help keep people in their homes. The new program sends a JFS worker to the court to immediately connect potential evictees with public assistance programs before they leave court.

That's what happened with Pitts. The JFS worker alerted Pitts to a program that could provide one-time money to prevent his eviction before the holiday season. As a result, Pitts used a program he knew nothing about to pay his landlord the \$1,300 he owed. Pitts and his daughter kept their apartment.

"She was very helpful," Pitts said of the JFS worker. "It was truly a blessing.

"I would have been evicted and would have had to sell my stuff."

The program is important to Franklin County as it seeks to keep people off public assistance. That's key in Ohio's largest county, which also has the largest county eviction court and highest eviction rate in the state. In 2016, Franklin County's

– Had 17,889 eviction cases filed.

– Issued 10,437 evictions.

– Saw 6,642 cases in which evicted renters' property was set on the street.

"We do, unfortunately, have the highest numbers in Ohio," said David Jump, administrative magistrate for Franklin County Municipal Court.

Jump said he supports the new JFS program because it helps keep people in their homes and helps landlords get their money.

"The vast majority of evictions are based on the nonpayment of rent that's usually caused by a catastrophic event," Jump added. "It's of benefit to both sides."

The program started Nov. 14 and prevented one eviction the first day. In its first week, it helped save four families from immediate eviction and assisted 11 others. Seven additional families are expected to avoid eviction because of the program, but their cases are being processed through the court.

"We absolutely want the program to work," Jump said.
