

# Franklin County to distribute rental aid

## Funds come from nearly \$34M in federal windfall

### Bill Bush

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Meagan Rogers, a mother and step-mother to four kids, said going back to school to become a registered nurse was one of the most difficult financial decisions she's ever made.

"It has been one tough year, and I'm ready to be done," said Rogers, 31, who will finish her program later this summer.

Rogers said that making it possible for her to move from being a licensed practical nurse to a registered nurse was rental assistance she received through Resiliency Bridge, a program that provides Franklin County residents housing assistance and other services to help them train for higher-paying jobs.

Now that program and three others, funded by Franklin County using federal COVID rental-assistance dollars, will be getting new leases on life with additional funding not anticipated earlier this year.

The Franklin County Board of Commissioners will act swiftly to begin distributing a windfall of federal rental-assistance funds that were left over nationally from pandemic-relief efforts, with four ordinances totaling almost \$34 million set to be approved at their meeting Tuesday.

The four measures the commissioners are expected to approve: a \$22 million grant that would go to IMPACT Community Action to provide rental and utility assistance to county residents; \$9 million to the county

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# Rental aid

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Department of Job and Family Services for the same purpose; \$2.2 million to the Homeless Families Foundation to provide housing stability funds to households — like Rogers' — participating in the Resiliency Bridge worker-training program; and \$500,000 to the Legal Aid Society of Columbus to provide legal assistance to tenants facing eviction.

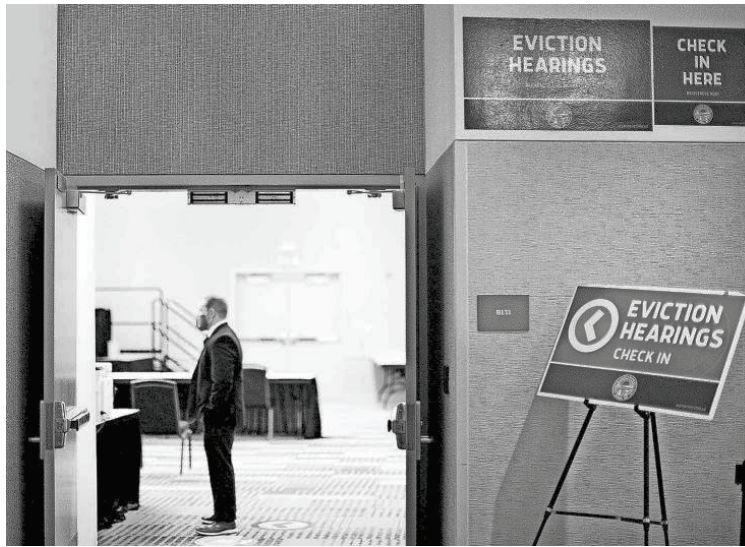
In late January, the U.S. Treasury announced it was redistributing \$690 million in unspent COVID rental assistance because some agencies weren't spending it fast enough, and "would not be able to fully deploy available funds during the program's lifespan."

The first tranche of redistributed funds went to 89 state and local grantees across the nation, including Columbus and Franklin County, which collected outsized sums that local officials attributed to its model of using a web of local nonprofit agencies that had proved efficient at getting the cash quickly into the hands of qualified renters and landlords.

Central Ohio's share of the reallocation has been, in a word, massive. Before January, Franklin County had received \$33.4 million in federal COVID-related rental assistance since the start of the pandemic's emergency programs. But just since the start of this year, the county has received an additional \$55.6 million, said Tyler Lowry, spokesperson for the county commissioners.

And the county's allocation is on top of another \$68 million reallocation awarded to the city of Columbus this year, bringing central Ohio's windfall to more than \$123 million — a deluge of unspent rental-assistance dollars more than was re-allocated to the entire state of California, with roughly 30 times more residents than Franklin County.

As part of debt-ceiling negotiations with Congress, the Biden administration agreed with House Republicans to claw back a portion of unspent COVID relief funds estimated to between \$50 billion and \$70 billion across numerous programs.



**During the COVID pandemic, Franklin County Municipal Court eviction hearings like, this one Jan. 26, 2021, were temporarily moved to the Greater Columbus Convention Center to provide safe distancing.** COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER/COLUMBUS DISPATCH



**Affordable housing became even more scarce in Columbus when the Latitude Five25 apartment towers were deemed unsafe and closed late last year.** JOSEPH SCHELLER/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

That might help explain local officials' urgency in quickly dispersing large chunks of the new rental assistance dollars, even though the program doesn't officially need to make its final expenditures until late 2025. The city began spending its windfall at a meeting last week.

Janas doesn't think the rental assistance funds currently are in danger of being clawed back.

"I think that we've moved beyond that," Janas said. "I don't think that risk exists like it might have a month or two back, in terms of Congress trying to reclaim that (rental assistance) money."

"There's an urgency to get the money out, but not because we're worried about anybody clawing it back, but because residents need it."

Yet John O'Grady, president of the county Board of Commissioners, remains wary.

"We need to get it all done so that we don't have any of this money left," O'Grady told The Dispatch. "The last thing we want is for this money to go back to Washington."

Even after Tuesday's appropriations, the county would still have about \$16 million in rental assistance dollars left over. Some of that money, under the federal rules, could be used to subsidize new affordable housing construction, something that county officials are considering, Janas said.

Rogers said she doesn't think she'd be graduating from nursing school this summer without the rental assistance funds. She not only received help with rent, but also with utilities, transportation issues, and food budget — even Christmas presents for her kids.

But it still wasn't easy, she said.

"You have to be successful in the program and showing progress," she said. "You just can't say 'I'm going to school.' You have to show that you're working and you're being successful with your grades and everything, and prove that."

"When I heard about this program, it seemed as if it was like a little too good to be true. And then, it's been absolutely amazing. I couldn't have made it through school successfully."

*wbush@gannett.com*  
@ReporterBush