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# Columbus approves rental aid contract

## Nonprofit to oversee distribution of funds

### Bill Bush

Columbus Dispatch  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Columbus City Council began the process of distributing a new windfall of \$68 million in additional federal rental assistance dollars by approving a \$26.13 million contract Monday with a local nonprofit social services provider to oversee distributing the funds to renters in need.

The contract with The Wells Foundation “is making sure that we can get the payments out of the rental assistance as quickly as possible to make sure our residents’ obligations are met and our landlords get paid,” city Development Director Michael Stevens told the council.

The city will work with a number of local nonprofit agencies to provide intake/application services to tenants and landlords and “operation services” such as providing website hosting, eligibility determination, monitoring, fraud investigation and software platforms. But instead of giving funds directly to the nonprofits to disburse to eligible recipients, The Wells Foundation will “hold and disburse the funds,” according to an informational sheet attached to the ordinance.

The city “will put in place a number of risk reduction and monitoring procedures to safeguard the funds under

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# Rental aid

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this agreement,” the document stated, like advancing the funds to the foundation in \$2-million installments as money is disbursed.

Council approved another \$1.75 million, no-bid deal with Greenwood 360 LLC to “partner with local nonprofit agencies and other program service providers and act as the application manager,” processing applications, making determinations of eligibility, and providing batch data to The Wells Foundation for payments. The for-profit firm is registered to Brian Greenwood, whose online LinkedIn page says the firm develops back-office systems that speed the application of forgivable loans.

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

The Dispatch reported last month that central Ohio received a huge portion of that redistribution after federal authorities gave a thumbs-up to the city’s decentralized rental-assistance model, developed during the COVID pandemic, that used community nonprofits to distribute funds to residents and landlords.

“It’s huge; it’s just monumental,” Charlie J. Boos, executive director of the Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio, said previously of the amount of dollars received locally. “The amount of resources that Columbus and Franklin County got combined is more than anywhere else in the country. Our central Ohio region got more resources than all of California put together and all of New York (state) put together.”

The vast majority of the cash must go toward rent and utility assistance for low-income residents, not to help pay mortgages, Boos said. But it also allows for “stability services,” such as eviction mediation, and up to 25% of the funds could go to subsidize the construction of new housing units for very low-income residents, she previously had said.

The \$68-million windfall needs to

be expended by December 2025. It is part of a total of \$152 million in unspent federal COVID relief funds that the city must yet spend, with varying deadlines over the next few years.

Those interested in applying for rental and utility assistance can get information at [www.rentful614.com](http://www.rentful614.com).

In other business Monday, City Council appropriated \$45,000 to purchase more than 200 handgun lock boxes for city residents. That’s in addition to the 1,000 distributed by Columbus Public Health last year.

The council late last year adopted what Columbus city officials have called “common sense” gun control laws that include properly securing firearms. The laws have been challenged in court by Republican Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost and the right-leaning Buckeye Institute.

Firearms have become the leading cause of death for American children and teens.

The council on Monday also reaffirmed its commitment to the “Vision Zero” program, stating that the city’s goal will be to eliminate all traffic-related fatalities by 2035.

“Key city departments, including Public Service, Public Health, Public Safety, and the Mayor’s Office, are actively engaged in developing an “Action Plan 2.0,” a five-year plan through 2028. The plan could include “many strategies to slow speeds, focus on safe street design, and foster community engagement and a culture change that prioritizes protecting lives above all else, for all forms of travel along our city streets for walking, biking, rolling, driving and using transit,” according to an information sheet attached to the ordinance.

“No specific grant opportunities have been identified at this time,” the document noted.

Columbus Mayor Andrew J. Ginther announced in spring 2020 that the city had signed on to a traffic safety philosophy developed in Sweden in the late 1990s that seeks to change how traffic planners think about vehicle fatalities.

“However, unfortunately, we have continued to have lives lost on our roads in Columbus,” Columbus Public Service Director Jennifer Gallagher told the council. She noted that 72 traffic deaths occurred in the city last year, not including those on freeways.

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