

Surge in evictions feared

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Every day, the mediators take calls from cash-strapped tenants who mistakenly believe that because eviction courts are closed, they can stop paying rent.

“People think they’ve got this reprieve between now and June 1 when the courts reopen,” said Shelley Whalen, executive director of Community Mediation Services of Central Ohio. “That’s a real misguided notion.”

And it could wind up contributing to what many fear will be a crush of new cases added to the already-substantial backlog of pending evictions in Franklin County and in other courts throughout the state.

“The problem that existed before all this has just grown,” Whalen said. “Evictions are in fact still being filed. We’re worried that come June, there is going to be this onslaught of tenants getting a reality check.”

In addition to urging tenants to pay as they can and to stay in contact with their landlords, housing and legal-aid advocates are calling on federal and state lawmakers to enact policies to help address housing stability during the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

A report released last week by the Ohio Poverty Law Center said the state should direct portions of new and existing federal funds toward housing needs and create a broad-based rental-assistance program that can quickly distribute money to Ohioans facing eviction.

More than 1.5 million households in Ohio, or about 34% of all households in the state, rent their residences.

“A roof, at this point, is health and safety,” said Kristen Lewis, advocacy director for Southeastern Ohio Legal Services.

According to the report, Ohio is one of only six states without a statewide policy on evictions during the COVID-19 outbreak. Though courts in Ohio’s large metropolitan areas have an eviction moratorium in place — cases still can be filed, but absent an emergency there are no hearings and no judgments enforced — more than two dozen other Ohio courts continued to hold eviction hearings as of April 21.

The Eviction Lab at Princeton University recently released a “COVID-19 Housing Policy Scorecard” for states based on responses related to eviction and housing. Ohio ranked near the bottom for its lack of a statewide policy.

“This has to be a priority,” Susan Jagers, director of the Ohio Poverty Law Center, said of efforts to curb evictions. “Both renters and property owners need support.”

The federal coronavirus stimulus program known as the CARES Act includes a temporary moratorium, but it applies only to renters living in properties financed by federally backed mortgages and renters living in federally assisted housing.

In Franklin County, where some 17,000 eviction cases are filed each year, the Municipal Court's mediation service is poised to start reviewing pending cases to see whether some can be closed or resolved through mediation, Administrative Judge Ted Barrows said.

The court is trying to find the best ways "to handle a backlog that's very large," Barrows said, with evictions and traffic filings among the most numerous cases. Prior to the closure, it wasn't unusual for Franklin County to handle nearly 200 eviction cases in one day.

Dimitri Hatzifotinos, a lawyer with the Willis Law Firm who represents the Columbus Apartment Association, said the organization considers a rental-assistance fund its top priority.

"The best way to avoid evictions, and to avoid mortgage defaults, is to allow the payers to have enough funds," he said.

He is less supportive of a statewide moratorium. "There are a lot of differences in a rural community and places like Columbus," Hatzifotinos said.

He also said he's optimistic there won't be a big surge in evictions later this spring and summer as landlords work with unemployed tenants and, when possible, agree to payment plans.

"The last thing I want to do is evict," said Ted Sinks, a Delaware County resident who owns a multi-unit apartment complex in Scioto County. "What I'm hoping is that people will pay their rent on time. For those who can't, we're willing to work with them."

He said it's not yet clear how much effect the shutdown and widespread job losses will have on the rental landscape.

Whalen, of Columbus-based Community Mediation Services, said there's little doubt that scores of renters will need help. And the cost is far higher when families wind up in the homeless system.

"Those of us on the prevention end are continually challenged with funding," Whalen said. "It seems to not get nearly as much attention." rprice@dispatch.com

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