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Baker-Polito Administration Announces Comprehensive Eviction Diversion Initiative To Keep People Safely Housed During Pandemic

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

10/12/2020

Office of Governor Charlie Baker and Lt. Governor Karyn Polito

Governor's Press Office

Executive Office of the Trial Court

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Baker-Polito Administration Announces Comprehensive Eviction Diversion Initiative To Keep People Safely Housed During Pandemic

BOSTON — Today, the Baker-Polito Administration announced a comprehensive set of resources, known as the Eviction Diversion Initiative, to support tenants and landlords during the financial challenges caused by the pandemic. The goal of this initiative is to keep tenants safely in their homes and to support the ongoing expenses of landlords once the Commonwealth's pause of evictions and foreclosures expires on Saturday, October 17th. This strategy was developed by a cross-agency team assembled by the Administration in coordination with the Massachusetts Trial Court to manage the end of the moratorium on October 17th and reflects input from a broad range of stakeholders.

"The pandemic has created financial challenges for many individuals and families who are struggling with rent payments, and today we are pleased to announce a $171 million initiative to promote household stability, and provide more support for tenants and small landlords," **said Governor Charlie Baker.** "This strategy has been designed to be user friendly and easily accessible for tenants and landlords in need, and is comprised of new or expanded programs to help people stay in their homes. This would not be possible without the Legislature's foresight in granting flexibility for the RAFT authorization. I am grateful to the Court System and all stakeholders for their partnership in this effort in keeping all families and households stable throughout this pandemic."

"We are pleased to provide new options for tenants and landlords to come together prior to an eviction and to quickly find a new home if a resolution is not reached," **said Lt. Governor Karyn Polito.** "These new and expanded resources will meet residents where they are and provide enhanced assistance in navigating a complex process, which has been made even more difficult by this pandemic."

"The Trial Court has modified its procedures to provide for a two tier process that will enable tenants and landlords to access resources and mediate their disputes in order to preserve tenancies," **said Trial Court Chief Justice Paula Carey.** "The Trial Court has worked to increase its technological capacity to handle these cases safely when parties come into court and to provide those without assistance with information and access to technology where needed."

The Administration is making a $171 million total commitment this fiscal year, with $112 million of new funding to support new and expanded housing stability programs during the remainder of the fiscal year, including:

- $100 million commitment this fiscal year to expand the capacity of the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program to provide relief to renters and landlords impacted by COVID-19;
- $48.7 million to HomeBASE and other rapid rehousing programs for when tenants are evicted and are at risk of homelessness;
- $12.3 million to provide tenants and landlords with access to legal representation and related services prior to and during the eviction process, as well as community mediation to help tenants and landlords resolve cases outside of court;
- $6.5 million for Housing Consumer Education Centers (HCECs), the "front door" for those facing a housing emergency; and
- $3.8 million for the Tenancy Preservation Program (TPP), to provide case management support and to act as a neutral party to help tenants and landlords come to agreement.

New investments will expand the capacity of the RAFT program and increase the maximum benefit available through RAFT from $4,000 to $10,000 per household, with a goal of helping more families stabilize their housing for six months, or until the end of June if there are school-age children in the household, on their path to recovery.

New funding will also expand capacity at the nine regional Housing Consumer Education Centers (HCECs) to provide housing counseling and coordinate with community mediators, legal services, and caseworkers. Income eligible tenants and landlords will also be able to access legal representation and related services as they navigate the eviction process.

The Administration is also updating the RAFT program to improve turnaround time on applications, while maintaining program integrity, by:

- streamlining the application process for both the RAFT and Emergency Rental and Mortgage Assistance (ERMA) programs for low to moderate income households;
- verifying applicant eligibility with data collected through MassHealth, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA), and the Department of Revenue (DOR);
- referring applicants to MassHIRE Career Centers; and
- allowing landlords who own fewer than 20 units to apply directly for RAFT and ERMA, with consent from tenants.

"It is important that we support both our tenants and landlords who are struggling due to COVID-19, and changes to the RAFT program, as well as increased resources, will deliver relief more efficiently," **said Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Mike Kennealy.** "To keep people in their homes and help property owners with expenses, we are streamlining the RAFT application process, expanding the capacity at the 'front doors' where tenants access assistance, and allowing small landlords to apply directly for available funding."

"We are beyond proud of the collaborative approach that led to the Eviction Diversion Initiative, and are thankful for our partners at the Massachusetts Trial Court Division and Chief Justice Paula Carey, and our vital housing agencies, including CEDAC, MassHousing, and MHP," **said Housing and Community Development Undersecretary Jennifer Maddox.** "This package of new and expanded resources will help us reach thousands more households in need to prevent evictions and ensure stability for families with children through the end of the school year."

With the goal of bringing landlords and tenants together to avoid an eviction, the Administration will invest in expanding access to mediation services. In coordination with the Trial Court, the Administration is working to launch a new Community Mediation program that will be available prior to a court filing, and supplement court-provided mediation that is generally available after a filing has been made. The Administration will also provide funding to the Trial Courts to support bringing back recall judges to help handle caseload once the moratorium ends and to add additional housing specialists to help mediate agreements. Additionally, the existing Tenancy Preservation Program (TPP) will be expanded to serve a broader population of vulnerable households.

Massachusetts will also provide additional funding for post-eviction diversion, helping households to find new housing quickly and prevent a longer period of homelessness. HomeBASE, the Commonwealth's rapid rehousing benefit, and the Strategic Prevention Initiative (SPI) will be expanded and continue to offer financial assistance and stabilization case management services to families as they are in the process of securing stable housing. A new temporary emergency program will also provide funds to households for periods of up to 12 months to assist with moving expenses, rent, including first or last month's, or security deposit, while transitioning into a stable housing situation.

CDC Moratorium

When the state moratorium expires, a moratorium established by the Center for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) will become effective in Massachusetts. Through December, the CDC moratorium will prevent evictions for non-payment for qualified tenants who submit a written declaration to their landlord. Courts will accept filings and process cases, and may enter judgments but will not issue an order of execution (the court order that allows a landlord to evict a tenant) until after the expiration of the CDC order. Protection is limited to households who meet certain income and vulnerability criteria. Declaration may be found at **https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/declaration-form.pdf** (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/declaration-form.pdf)

In order to ensure tenants are aware of available resources, the Administration has kicked off a public information campaign, including a new option available to call the Massachusetts 2-1-1 information hotline, effective Tuesday, October 13. Operators for 2-1-1 are trained to answer questions and connect residents to the agencies that administer RAFT and ERMA. An easier path to important information has also been launched on the state's website: **mass.gov/CovidHousingHelp** (/mass.gov/CovidHousingHelp). This effort also includes outreach through social media, videos, webinars, and other mediums. All materials and messaging will be made available in multiple languages.

"Housing is a human right and, in the middle of this pandemic due to COVID-19, it is both a concern for public health and economic stability. We applaud the Baker Administration's commitment to launching this important initiative," **said Annette Duke, Senior Housing Attorney, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute.** "A broad

coalition has come together to support access to legal assistance in eviction actions in Massachusetts because such access will avert unnecessary evictions, displacement, and homelessness - and will prevent human and economic devastation. This initiative creates a path to housing stability that will strengthen all our communities."

“Community mediation is uniquely suited to be of service during this pandemic. It increases access to justice and builds capacity for conflict resolution and social capital within communities,” **said Susan Jeghelian, Executive Director, Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration.** “The Baker-Polito Administration’s plan to deploy community mediation as a tool for eviction diversion to promote housing stability is a smart, strategic use of local dispute resolution resources.”

"The Baker-Polito Administration recognizes the threat an eviction crisis poses to our existing housing and public health crises and is taking important steps today,” **Stefanie Coxe, Executive Director, Regional Housing Network of Massachusetts.** “There's a long road ahead and those who need help should get in line now."

“As the public health emergency persists, renters and property owners continue to struggle in keeping up with mounting bills. The Governor’s commitment for RAFT will help thousands of people catch up and pay their rent for the next several months, helping renters, property owners, and neighborhoods stay stable through these turbulent times. Legal assistance for tenants and owners with low incomes and outreach about available resources are also key components to preventing evictions, and we thank the Administration for including these provisions,” **said Rachel Heller, CEO, CHAPA.** “However, more funding from the federal government will be critical in the months ahead to prevent people from losing their homes during and after the pandemic."

"A lot of us, renters and landlords alike, have been badly impacted by the events of the last seven months. Now that small owners can apply for RAFT on behalf of our renters, it's clearer than ever that we're all in this together and we can get through this together,” **said Doug Quattrochi, Executive Director, Mass Landlords.**

These resources and programs will help thousands of families remain in their housing during this critical time. It is essential that tenants understand their rights and the resources available to them, and all of us can help spread the word,” **said Joe Kriesberg, President and CEO, MACDC**. “Now we need the federal government to come to the table and pass meaningful relief! CDCs remain committed to keeping their tenants stable and safe, and we urge all landlords to partner with their tenants to find equitable solutions.”

Together, the Administration estimates resources will help thousands of households with varying levels of needs; up to 50,000 households will have access to services at their local Housing and Consumer Education Centers, up to 25,000 households will have access to legal support or community mediation, and up to 18,000 households will have direct financial support. These investments reflect the Administration’s strong commitment to stable housing for families.

For people in need of assistance, please call 211, visit the frequently asked questions website **here** (/info-details/covid-19-eviction-diversion-frequently-asked-questions), and see the fact sheet **here** (/info-details/covid-19-eviction-diversion-initiative-overview). Please be aware all offices are closed for the holiday on Monday, October 12, 2020.

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