Governor Mills & MaineHousing Expand Rental Relief Program to Help Prevent Evictions, Counter Reductions in Federal Unemployment Benefits

July 30, 2020

Governor Janet Mills announced today that MaineHousing will double its rental assistance from $500 to $1,000 through the COVID-19 Rental Relief Program beginning next Monday, August 3rd. The Governor, who established the program with MaineHousing in April, is dedicating an initial $5 million in Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) to support the expansion. The Governor today also signed an Executive Order continuing expanded timeframe protections for renters in the evictions process. The moves come as the Maine Supreme Judicial Court plans to reopen courts for hearings next week and as the Federal government appears poised to reduce Federal unemployment benefits, leaving people concerned they may face a housing cliff.

> *"Many Maine people are still experiencing significant financial hardship as a result of COVID-19, and the last thing they need to worry about is losing their home," said Governor Janet Mills. "While the future of the $600 boost in Federal unemployment benefits remains in question, we believe the combination of an expanded rental relief program and continued protections through the updated Executive Order can help renters while also not leaving landlords behind. My Administration will continue to work closely with MaineHousing and local agencies across the state to help keep Mainers housed."*
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> *"We know that eviction concerns across Maine are significant. We want people to remain safe and secure in their homes – and this extended program will help," said Daniel Brennan, Director of MaineHousing. "As we work on a number of solutions needed to address housing challenges that are exacerbated by the pandemic, we hope that landlords and tenants are continuing to work together to keep Mainers housed."*

With the support of $5 million in Coronavirus Relief Funds from Governor Mills, MaineHousing is doubling its rental assistance payment from $500 to $1,000 through the COVID-19 Rental Relief Program. Under the program, each household that meets certain ability to pay requirements may receive a payment of up to $1,000 in rental assistance paid directly to the landlord for up to three months. The assistance may also be used to pay for overdue rent. In accepting the payment, the landlord agrees not to evict the tenant for nonpayment for the month the payment was issued.

MaineHousing established the program in April at the urging of Governor Mills to help prevent evictions in the midst of the pandemic. This builds on a Financial Order signed by Governor Mills earlier this month that dedicates $2.2 million in Federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to also support the COVID-19 Rental Relief Program. The Administration considers the $5 million an initial investment with the potential for additional funding in the future depending on the need and additional support from the Federal government, for which Governor Mills continues to advocate.

The Governor also signed an Executive Order today that continues expanded timeframe protections for renters in the evictions process. The Governor's Order allows evictions scheduled for hearing prior to, and unrelated to, the pandemic to move forward. However, it continues to protect tenants who are considered "at will", meaning they do not have a legal agreement with their landlord, and cannot make their rent payment, by

requiring a landlord to provide at least 45 days' notice, rather than 30 under law, to a tenant to leave. If the landlord is attempting to evict those at-will tenants, the Order also extends an eviction notice timeframe from 7 to 30 days. The Governor also maintained strengthened penalties for landlords who may try to evict tenants by unlawful means, such as, for example, turning off utilities.

The actions taken by the Governor today build on her Administration's work to secure and protect housing and the health of Maine people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier today, the Department of Health and Human Services announced $1 million to significantly and quickly expand education, prevention, and services -- such as housing to support quarantine -- to help reduce the disproportionately large racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19 in Maine.

Further, on March 31, Governor Mills issued an Executive Order bolstering General Assistance vouchers for basic necessities, such as housing. Under the Executive Order, all applications for General Assistance are processed as emergency applications for eligibility purposes, and certain other requirements are waived. The order also allows eligible individuals to reapply after 60 days rather than 30 days for ongoing assistance. Additionally, on March 25, 2020, Governor Mills directed the Maine Department of Health and Human Services to adjust requirements for the Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP) beginning May 1, 2020. BRAP helps clients with serious mental illness, including those who also have substance use disorder, obtain transitional housing. The transition to lower income requirements was completed by July 1, 2020 for all new and existing BRAP participants.

More information about the COVID-19 Rental Relief Program, including eligibility requirements, application materials, statistics about the program, and frequently asked questions may be found at www.mainehousing.org/covidrent.

A copy of the Executive Order is attached (PDF).

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