

FRANKLIN COUNTY

Public housing tenants face pandemic hurdles

By **MARY BYRNE**
Staff Writer

With unemployment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, residents living in buildings managed by local housing authorities may have found themselves struggling to make ends meet.

"Tenants are certainly struggling to pay rent," said Gina Govani, executive director of the Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) in Montague. "We've been working with tenants — both household and commercial — to work through how they're going to pay rent."

Last week, a new law went into effect that places a temporary moratorium on non-essential evictions of residential and small business tenants.

William Abrashkin, interim director at the Greenfield Housing Authority (GHA), said this does not mean tenants never pay rent; but rather, rent payments can be deferred without a late fee.

He explained that the authority essentially has two sources of income on the public housing side of the business — the subsidy from the state, out of the state budget, and tenant rent.

With Section 8 Voucher housing,

however, voucher recipients pay their share of the rent directly to the landlord, and the housing authority receives a subsidy from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to make up the difference.

"There's no question if authorities are not compensated by state funding, yes, it would take a hit," Abrashkin said. "Say a resident has lost their job and then reports that, then the subsidy ... would be increased in proportion. In that case, housing would not take a hit."

But Abrashkin said it's too soon to



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The Greenfield Housing Authority on Elm Terrace in Greenfield.

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tell what kind of impact the crisis will have on housing authorities, as it depends largely on state funding. He said there are talks of developing new subsidy funding formulas in recognition of the blow housing authorities are taking during the pandemic.

“I’m sure that (the Department of Housing and Community Development), the state housing authority, is aware of this need and working on it,” he said.

In some ways, the state has already stepped in since the crisis began, finding ways to assist those who are struggling to pay rent due to unemployment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gov. Charlie Baker announced March 25 the new fund, Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT), which assists low-income renters and homeowners while Massachusetts is in a state of emergency. RAFT is funded by the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD).

“That money is going quickly,” Govani said. “The number of inquiries coming into our housing authority ... has doubled.”

And she expects that trend to continue, as people figure out what their new income is and what their needs are.

“We encourage them to reach out if they can’t pay rent,” she said.

Govani said the pandemic has also altered the way the housing authority currently works with prospective tenants in need of housing.

“The state’s DHCD has become more lenient and ... is encouraging us to be more

lenient with guidelines and requirements, such as documentation that we would typically accept,” she said.

The process for actually getting people into homes — the application, paperwork and lease signing — is being done using email, phone and the video conference platform, Zoom.

Briefings for Section 8 vouchers have also gone remote, despite previous requirements that briefings be done in person, according to Govani.

“Like most of the other business in Massachusetts, we’re trying to figure this out,” she said.

In Greenfield, Abrashkin said transitioning apartments from one tenant to the next has also been a challenge for the authority.

He said properties with single entrances are manageable, but the authority has decided to postpone the process for preparing units with common area entrances.

Overall, he said, the authority has prioritized cleanliness and sanitation in all its properties; closed basketball courts and playgrounds; and placed social distancing signs and cones wherever necessary.

Occupants and guests of Winslow Apartments on Main Street are required to wear masks in the building’s common areas.

Abrashkin noted the eviction moratorium that went into effect last week does not cover evictions for criminal conduct, which could include disregard to measures taken to promote safety.

“We’re not trying to evict people,” he said. “We’re just trying to educate people.”

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