

Help for struggling renters available

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By Karen Shuey

[@KarenShueyRE on Twitter](mailto:kshuey@readingagle.com)

News that President Joe Biden had extended a federal moratorium on evictions Monday provided some welcome breathing room for those struggling to pay their rent during the coronavirus pandemic.

But just because renters won't be kicked out of their homes through the end of June doesn't mean they should wait to ask for help.

During a virtual roundtable Tuesday hosted by U.S. Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, housing officials from Berks and Chester counties said now is the time to take action.

advantage of them as soon as possible.

"I want to make sure that people in our community know that they have the resources they need to be able to access the housing that we all need and that we all deserve," Houlahan said. "So many have struggled during this pandemic at no fault of their own."

The Chester County Democrat, who represents Reading and many southwestern communities in Berks, highlighted the extension of the eviction moratorium and the housing assistance included in recent stimulus packages that she has helped muscle through Congress.

"Lives and livelihoods have been lost during this very difficult time, and I believe it's incumbent upon leaders to do everything in our power to make sure we are supporting our communities — particularly those who are the most vulnerable among us," she said.

Programs that offer assistance for rent and utility payments are up and running. And those who need help are encouraged to take

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earning less than \$198,000 who must declare they can't pay for rent because of COVID-related hardships and will become homeless if evicted.

Patrick Bokovitz, director of the Chester County Community Development Department, said during the roundtable discussion that the moratorium extension gives the county more time to help those in need stay in their homes. But, he stressed, time is of the essence.

"We plan to map those households that are served so that we better understand what the needs are and what areas we need to reach out to more," he said. "Each part of the county is different so we want to be very responsive in that way to make sure people know help is out there."

Kimberly Talbot, executive director of the Reading Human Relations Commission, said her agencies and others like it are trying to spread the word that help is available to those struggling in Berks. "The pandemic has had a devastating impact on families," she said. "But I don't think we

Houlahan said she was proud to announce that Biden had extended the moratorium on housing evictions just days before the ban for renters affected by the pandemic was set to expire.

will even know the full extent of what it has done until sometime down the road.”

The ban on evicting renters was first put in place by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in September, with public health officials arguing it was needed to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in settings like homeless shelters.

The moratorium applies to single renters making \$99,000 or less and couples

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