



Housing Counseling to Support Renters in Crisis

Martha M. Galvez, Camille H. Anoll, and Abby Boshart

April 2021

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its second year, millions of renters remain in crisis. Federal relief funds that could help renters stay current with their payments and settle debts owed to landlords have been slow to reach them and cannot fully meet the need. In response to the ongoing crisis, organizations that provide housing counseling have been adapting their services to better meet renters' needs during the pandemic. To understand providers' responses to the pandemic and the resources they may require to better serve renters, we interviewed representatives from organizations that support counseling agencies or provide counseling directly to renters. We found that as demand for rental counseling increased during the pandemic, counseling agencies pivoted away from services focused mainly on homeownership to expand or adapt services for renters while shifting from in-person to virtual services. These changes have required agencies to rapidly get up to speed on the federal, state, and local services and policies aimed at helping renters stabilize their housing.

Moving forward, providers will need new resources, guidance, and capacity to meet renters' needs and ensure that services reach the people and communities hardest hit by the pandemic. In our interviews, counseling providers universally called for more emergency rental assistance in the form of cash support and expanded access to legal services for renters to help them avoid eviction or negotiate with landlords. Counseling providers themselves need access to more—and more flexible—funding for training, capacity building, and services not traditionally covered under rental counseling services as defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

About the Housing Crisis Research Collaborative

The Housing Crisis Research Collaborative aims to address the long-standing inequities in access to safe, stable, and affordable rental housing that have been laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. We provide policymakers at all levels of government with the data and analysis they need to design, implement, and evaluate more equitable and effective rental housing and community development responses to the pandemic and the ongoing rental housing affordability crisis. More information is available at <https://housingcrisisresearch.org/>.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting job losses have created a precarious situation for renters.¹ By the start of 2021, rental debt had accumulated to unprecedented amounts—nearly \$60 billion, according to one estimate—and nearly 20 percent of renters could not pay at least some portion of their rent (Parrott and Zandi 2021). This is also a crisis for landlords, who rely on rental payments to pay their mortgages and other expenses to maintain properties and make repairs. Landlords with fewer than 10 properties are especially struggling and may face pressure to sell.² These landlords are responsible for a large share of the nation’s supply of affordable housing, which could disappear if they cannot hold on to their properties.³

Black and Latino renters and landlords have been hardest hit by the pandemic’s economic impacts.* Renters of color are more likely to work in lower-wage and hourly jobs, have experienced greater reductions in income, and report more difficulty paying their housing costs (Cunningham, Hariharan, and Fiol 2021). By the end of 2020, Black, Latino, and Asian renters were roughly twice as likely as white renters to report being behind on their rent, with more than 15 percent of Black renters reporting in the US Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey that they were at risk of eviction (CFPB 2021). Landlords of color are also more vulnerable to income loss—they are more likely to own fewer properties, rely on rental payments to maintain properties, and need to sell when they lose income.⁴

Renters have few places to turn for help when they fall behind on rent. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s eviction moratorium prevents evictions from being executed through June 2021 but has not fully halted filings, evictions, or informal displacement outside court processes.⁵ In the past year, federal pandemic relief legislation has allocated more than \$300 billion in emergency funds to various housing programs, and states have some flexibility to use the money for direct rental assistance or other services to support renters.⁶ This scale of investment is unprecedented, yet the availability of assistance lags far behind the need. State and local emergency rental assistance programs have quickly

* We have chosen to use the terms “Black” and “Latino” throughout this report, even when they differ from terms used in source materials. We acknowledge this language may not reflect how people describe themselves and remain committed to employing respectful and inclusive language.

become oversubscribed and can provide only modest financial assistance, while funds have generally been disbursed slowly.⁷

With this backdrop of mounting rental arrears and scarce resources for renters, housing counseling is a tool that could help renters and landlords navigate housing debt and address their financial instability. In the wake of the subprime mortgage and foreclosure crisis that started in 2007, Congress acted to support homeowners facing foreclosure by allocating more than \$850 million to establish a program to support organizations that provide housing counseling (Sally et al. 2018). The National Foreclosure Mitigation Counseling program, led by NeighborWorks America, rapidly trained and funded counselors across the country, eventually serving more than 2 million clients over 10 years and helping many avoid foreclosure.

This network remains in place—as of the start of 2021, there were 1,560 HUD-approved housing counseling agencies.⁸ In 2020, the agencies served roughly 947,400 households, both renters and homeowners.⁹ However, 10.3 million renters had arrears as of the end of 2020, far surpassing the capacity of counseling agencies (Parrott and Zandi 2021). The funding allocated to housing counseling during the pandemic has been relatively limited considering the demand, and none has been earmarked to expand capacity for rental counseling. HUD granted more than \$52 million to housing counseling organizations in 2020, including \$12.5 million in supplemental funding distributed in July 2020.¹⁰

In “Increasing Rental Counseling Capacity and Awareness as a Prescription for COVID-19,” Walsh and coauthors (2020) describe in detail the landscape of housing counseling for renters and highlight its potential to help those facing housing and financial instability during and after the pandemic. Our brief builds on that work to explore the ways that the housing counseling field has responded to the needs of renters in crisis and the resources required to strengthen counseling as an effective tool for helping renters obtain housing stability. To do so, we interviewed 18 leaders from eight housing counseling organizations—including state or national networks of housing counseling agencies and direct counseling service providers—about their experiences with rental counseling during the pandemic (a list of the organizations whose leaders we spoke with is in the appendix). We asked providers the following questions:

- How has housing counseling adapted to meet the needs of renters during the pandemic?
- What have counseling agencies learned about renters’ needs?
- What tools or resources do counseling providers need to support renters in crisis?

In the rest of this brief, we provide an overview of housing and rental counseling, describe what we heard from counseling providers, and present some key takeaways and questions for future research.

What Is Rental Housing Counseling?

As described in more detail in Walsh and coauthors (2020) and Sally and coauthors (2018), housing counseling helps equip consumers to find, finance, rent, and maintain a home. It provides information or

referrals to support decisions related to purchasing or renting a home, prevents foreclosures, and helps people understand fair housing protections. HUD certifies and funds counseling agencies across the country to deliver services through HUD-certified counselors who help families prepare housing budgets, identify housing goals and outline plans to achieve them, and access other organizations' services that can assist in maintaining housing stability.¹¹ Although counselors typically discuss household finances with clients in the context of establishing a reasonable housing budget, housing counseling does not involve comprehensive financial planning that would include triaging debt or planning for long-term financial wellness.¹² Counseling is typically provided in one-on-one sessions or group education sessions, although many organizations also offer online information and guides for clients. Services are also available to support people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.¹³

Although rental counseling has been available through HUD-certified counselors, the types and scale of rental counseling services called for by the current crisis differ from the traditional counseling model focus. Pre-pandemic, HUD-approved agencies and counselors focused primarily on homeownership services such as pre-purchase advice or foreclosure prevention, with rental counseling less available or used. Data available on counseling services through HUD-approved agencies are imprecise, but in 2019 rental counseling workshops and one-on-one sessions accounted for only 10 percent of counseling services provided by counseling agencies.¹⁴ Currently, only 58 percent of the 1,560 HUD-approved housing counseling agencies appear to offer rental counseling.¹⁵

Rental counseling focuses on budgeting and understanding affordable rental costs, making sound rental housing decisions, understanding tenant rights and responsibilities, and helping families manage their rental payments and navigate financial shocks.¹⁶ The organizations whose leaders we interviewed provided minimal rental counseling before the pandemic, typically through educational seminars. Eviction prevention counseling—defined as individualized support to help renters at risk of eviction navigate their options, understand their rights, and negotiate with their landlords to stay in their homes—was described as a limited offering. Organizations that focused more on financial counseling and empowerment, such as GreenPath Financial Wellness, were more likely to provide eviction prevention counseling to clients. Eviction prevention services could include providing tenants with information about the eviction process after they have received an eviction filing, educating them about eviction moratoriums and assisting with any paperwork necessary to qualify, helping them apply for rental assistance, connecting them with legal services, or engaging a landlord at a renter's request to help negotiate a payment plan or find another solution to the renter's inability to pay. Larger networks that include affordable housing providers were another notable exception—they often worked closely with the renters in their properties before the pandemic. For example, NeighborWorks America offered supports for residents in partnership with property owners in their network.

How Housing Counselors Are Supporting Renters in Crisis

In this section, we discuss what we heard from counseling providers about their work with renters in crisis, including their assessments of renters' unique needs and the ways that rental counseling services have evolved during the pandemic. They noted that demand from renters for counseling and emergency

support increased rapidly when the pandemic started and has remained high, reflecting the complex and changing circumstances surrounding renters. Rental counseling requests to GreenPath Financial Wellness doubled in 2020, while other types of calls dropped. The overall volume of counseling requests is now closer to pre-pandemic levels, but the share of calls asking for rental counseling has stayed high.

The Challenges That Renters Face

Notably, according to counseling providers, the challenges and circumstances that renters face in the eviction crisis are different from those that homeowners experienced during the foreclosure crisis. For example, renters have fewer assets than homeowners, leaving them with fewer options to leverage to stay in their housing.¹⁷ Also, housing instability may be only one of several challenges that a renter faces during the pandemic. Absent an infusion of cash, direct rental assistance, or a return to work, renters are unlikely to be able to stabilize or pay back the rent they owe. As Lee Anne Adams of NeighborWorks America noted, “this crisis is multidimensional, affecting far beyond just housing, and including employment, health, community connections, and food security.”

In addition, the foreclosure process is more linear and predictable than the eviction process. Foreclosure policies and loss mitigation strategies are largely standardized and dictated by organizations such as the Federal Housing Administration, and counselors engage with a small number of lenders on behalf of clients and focus on a fairly narrow set of issues. The policies or regulations relevant to homeowners may not vary much by location, and homeowners can typically renegotiate their mortgages so they do not owe a lump sum when forbearance ends. In contrast, preventing evictions and understanding the challenges and options that renters in crisis face are more complex: relatively few options exist for relieving renters of debt owed to landlords, and resources available to renters or their counselors are more dispersed.

This isn't the same as the 2008 crisis, when so many mortgages were under water...More homeowners have equity now, and they have some cash. With the CARES Act, there are a lot more options available to them, and they can hang on a bit longer. They may be able to forbear, jump straight into modification, or look at short-sale opportunities. The impact is much more severe [for renters]. All of a sudden, you're looking at all of your bills and food insecurity and everything at once, and they [renters] fail much more quickly.

—Jennifer Fraser, GreenPath Financial Wellness

Helping Renters Meet Their Emergency Needs

The people we spoke with described responding to the increased demand from renters by incorporating or piloting new services, expanding or revising existing services, and focusing on identifying resources for renters who needed immediate help paying their rent or were facing food insecurity. This could include providing mediation between landlords and tenants or adapting counseling that was typically provided after natural disasters or other emergencies to help renters meet their immediate, basic needs.

Counselors connected renters with or referred them to emergency rental assistance programs, legal services, and financial supports or food assistance. Interviewees described wraparound services and financial supports as critical and a combination of housing counseling, financial counseling, and legal services as particularly helpful for renters at risk of eviction. [Wyoming Housing Network](#) developed a program for budgeting during a crisis, creating documents to help renters work through the process of ensuring that their basic needs were met and apply for assistance. [CARECEN](#) in Washington, DC, helped clients navigate unemployment applications and other emergency support systems that were ill-equipped to support the needs of the organization's primarily Spanish-speaking Latino clients. Some organizations created online or written resources for renters. GreenPath created an information hub on its website and posted articles, guides, webinars, and links to information on emergency assistance and state regulations.¹⁸ It also developed for its counselors a repository of information on local nonprofit resources, including legal aid, food assistance, housing supports, and other crucial services.

However, even after receiving emergency rental assistance to mitigate immediate threats of eviction, many renters still faced financial insecurity, unemployment, and an inability to pay future rent. Counseling agencies can step in and provide budgeting and financial counseling to help these renters create action plans to pay their future housing costs. But renters face ongoing financial hardship that traditional housing counseling cannot address.

Finally, renters and landlords are often unfamiliar with the requirements of local eviction moratoriums or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's or are unaware of how to comply with them. Organizations and counselors who previously focused on homeownership have had to learn the nuanced and rapidly changing landscape of renter rights, eviction policies, and emergency assistance programs that can vary widely even among jurisdictions in the same state. Staying current on federal, state, and local programs and policies and finding needed information or resources are ongoing challenges for counseling agencies. Lee Anne Adams of NeighborWorks noted, "For homeownership, there is FHA and organizations trying to provide an umbrella and guardrails for consumers, but for renters, it varies so much on a state-by-state level. I think this is another complicating factor for groups that are trying to get into this that traditionally have a different model."

Shifting How Services Are Delivered

During the pandemic, counseling organizations have primarily relied on serving renters through online platforms or the phone. Some providers that already offered telephonic services were at an advantage

compared with organizations that had traditionally relied on in-person services because they quickly transitioned to fully remote services. Organizations in areas that have experienced natural disasters may likewise have been better prepared to pivot to remote work. Other organizations faced more challenges, including significant financial costs, as they shifted to remote services after offices closed and in-person options were limited. Housing and Family Services of Greater New York continued to provide in-person services to meet their clients' needs. It reopened its offices in June 2020 to limited in-person sessions, has had some in-person presence at properties, and has been able to provide food support—with an overwhelmingly positive community response.

Interviewees noted some important advantages to providing counseling online or by phone. For example, counselors can more easily reach clients who live in areas that are far from a service provider's locations. In rural areas, providers may cover large areas, and transportation and the time required to travel to an in-person counseling session can be a barrier to some clients. Virtual services can be more flexible: they reduce clients' needs for travel, transportation, and child care. Providers noted "time poverty" and the daily challenge of competing responsibilities and priorities that clients must balance to engage with counseling.

When the pandemic hit, at first we could only make phone calls, which in a lot of cases doesn't help what people actually need. The first month I was home and making phone calls. Our clients expressed concern for the safety of our staff by asking, "How are you doing?" "Is anyone in your family ill?" and "When are you planning to reopen?" [They said] "I will talk to you when you reopen."

—Jonathan Goss, Housing and Family Services of Greater New York

However, the people we spoke with also said online and phone counseling created challenges in reaching out to or engaging with clients. Limited broadband access was widely cited as a barrier that people faced to receiving services or accessing information. People who have limited access to computers or phones or are less familiar or comfortable with technology may also have trouble engaging with counseling services or accessing information by phone or online. Interviewees said these platforms can pose particular challenges for seniors, among other groups. Phone or virtual counseling can also create barriers to building trust with clients and to conducting effective outreach to vulnerable communities.

To bridge these gaps, service providers have used creative solutions, such as providing tablets and internet hot spots at central locations for drive-in counseling.¹⁹ Facebook—a familiar and accessible platform for most clients—has also been used for outreach, and Facebook Live videos have been used to

demonstrate how to access services. One provider noted that turning off the camera function during a counseling session being conducted via a video call platform like Zoom helped increase engagement during one-on-one sessions.

Serving Marginalized Populations

In recognition of the disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on communities of color and people with low incomes, 40 percent of funds designated for housing counseling in the American Rescue Plan are dedicated to organizations that target those households or serve neighborhoods with large communities of color or low-income populations.²⁰ Two questions for counseling providers are to what extent do counseling services currently reach these populations or the communities most affected by the pandemic and what approaches are required to effectively target them.

Several organizations whose leaders we interviewed emphasized that before the pandemic, they were already serving people of color and people with low incomes in vulnerable neighborhoods. Once the pandemic began, they continued to do so as a trusted resource, without the need to explicitly target communities affected by COVID-19. The organizations currently support seniors, people experiencing homelessness, Latino immigrants, communities with low incomes, and rural communities. According to national HUD housing counseling data, services are reaching at least some of these communities.²¹ In the first quarter of 2021, more than 43 percent of participants in housing counseling programs were Black, almost 17 percent were Latino, and 27 percent were white. These programs also reached people who earn less than 80 percent of an area's median income—they accounted for more than 53 percent of households served.

However, some potential gaps in counseling providers' reach were noted. Language can be a barrier for counseling, especially if emergency assistance service providers do not translate their materials into languages other than English. Concerns and confusion about immigration status and eligibility requirements can also deter participation. Strategic partnerships with other service providers can be useful for reaching out to clients and connecting them with needed services, as can integrating counseling services into organizations based in communities most affected by the pandemic and job losses. The [Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund](#)'s municipal partners have set up "financial empowerment centers" in key community resources, including social services offices and community colleges, to provide professional financial counseling to people with low incomes and people of color.

Engaging with Landlords

Counseling providers noted that landlords, particularly "mom and pop" landlords with relatively few rental properties, feel the financial strain of their tenants' income losses, and keeping tenants in place may be in the best interest of landlords as well as tenants. Unit turnover—either because a renter leaves or is evicted—creates costs for the landlord, and both tenants and landlords can face fees as part of a formal eviction process. But as Jennifer Fraser of GreenPath said, "it is difficult for [landlords] to do the

right thing because they have their own bills to pay.” Unrecovered rental arrears ultimately affect landlords’ ability to maintain their properties.

Landlords may also struggle to access timely information about landlord and tenant rights, eviction moratoriums, and rental assistance options and may be unaware of the resources in place for landlords of tenants behind on rent. A recent survey by [Avail](#)—a service that helps landlords with a small number of rental units manage their properties—found that only about half of small landlords with lost rental income were aware of rental assistance available to landlords and tenants.²² Renters have the greatest need for support, but housing counseling providers noted that landlords may also need help or education on the constantly changing policies and programs relevant to them and their tenants. Jonathan Goss of Housing and Family Services of Greater New York noted that the organization had received calls from landlords—a group it had not previously worked directly with—asking for help understanding new COVID-19-related regulations and programs. At the pandemic’s start, it also reached out to owners and property managers to make sure tenants received essential services (heat, hot water, etc.). And NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley in Rhode Island is trying to address the need for information on regulations and programs through a long-standing landlord training.

With some innovative exceptions, however, counseling services that help landlords navigate rental arrears, access emergency rental assistance with or on behalf of a tenant, find solutions to minimize evictions, or avoid property sales are not available, and landlords are not seen as a distinct counseling population. Counselors may serve landlords who seek out traditional housing counseling as property owners at risk of foreclosure, assessing landlords’ options to improve their finances by leveraging or selling their properties, but counselors do not engage landlords on ways to address rental arrears. Exceptions include NeighborWorks, which is coordinating with affordable housing providers in its network to promote counselors as trusted supports available for tenants struggling to pay the rent and to help property owners recover lost income. In partnership with the National Foundation for Credit Counseling, the Housing Partnership Network is piloting a program that works with owners of multifamily properties to connect residents with credit counselors and other services. The program aims to ensure that residents have access to a trusted third-party resource to help develop repayment plans with creditors and property owners.²³

What Do Renters and Counseling Providers Need?

Counseling providers described a combination of funding and capacity constraints, information gaps, and programmatic limitations that affect their ability to support renters during the pandemic. Some counseling agencies noted that they have struggled to scale up nimbly in response to the crisis. Building the infrastructure needed to continue serving clients remotely has meant new costs and challenges even as staff members have themselves struggled with the pandemic’s impacts (e.g., juggling child care and remote learning, health concerns, and their own financial instability). Capacity to rapidly adapt to renters’ needs has been limited, as has the funding to increase staff capacity or add services.

Providers also described a mismatch between the services that housing counselors provide for renters in crisis, HUD's definition of rental counseling, and the services traditionally eligible for federal funding. For example, HUD's counseling framework requires counselors to create a budget, a financial and housing affordability analysis, and an action plan and to follow up with each client.²⁴ However, some of these steps are inappropriate for clients who are in a financial crisis and face illness, eviction, or food insecurity because of a pandemic-related job loss. Counseling providers noted that renters need fast and streamlined access to emergency rent or cash assistance, legal support, and help with basic needs. Some organizations find financial empowerment coaching models, which take a more holistic look at a person's circumstances and resources, more helpful for renters in crisis than traditional HUD counseling models that are more constrained in their approaches or perspectives on renters' goals. Providers with access to alternative funding for counseling said the other funding sources are easier to use for rental counseling than HUD counseling funding because they offer more flexibility in the services provided to meet renters' needs.

Partnerships have shown themselves to be helpful in meeting the needs of rental counseling clients, and counseling agencies are working to expand them. Housing Partnership Network staff members described agencies in their network that were pursuing partnerships so they could refer clients to services such as legal assistance, housing search support, and food assistance that would fill the gaps in their offerings. Additionally, partnerships have supported counseling organizations by offering funding to provide cash assistance to clients or to expand programming (e.g., the previously mentioned Housing Partnership Network-National Foundation for Credit Counseling program, which is being funded by Wells Fargo). Partnerships with state and local governments or private organizations have given counseling agencies the ability to administer rental assistance funding directly to their clients.

Counseling agencies have also needed to build or refresh counselors' knowledge of renter-specific needs and available resources. They have pivoted from traditional rental counseling services focused on educating clients about renter rights and rental decisions to providing information about emergency financial and rental assistance options, food assistance, eviction moratoriums, and other federal and local policy changes. Some organizations, such as the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, created or adapted trainings for their counselors and networks, and national organizations with a robust training infrastructure such as NeighborWorks developed new trainings for the field. HUD also provided training for counselors, including a "Readying Your Organization for Rental Housing Counseling" webinar series to build agencies' capacity to provide rental counseling during the pandemic. But additional, ongoing training is needed so counselors can stay current on federal and local emergency assistance options and can understand renter rights under eviction moratoriums as they expire.

Equipping counselors and renters with more accessible and timely information about the various local, state, and federal programs and policies that may affect renters is an ongoing need and challenge. The people we interviewed frequently noted the wide variation in how housing assistance resources are provided, as well as the challenges of understanding different rules, eligibility criteria, and program availability. One interviewee noted the potential benefits of standardizing how housing assistance is distributed across jurisdictions. Providers highlighted their struggles tracking federal and state

protections and the ongoing need for timely, accessible information about state and local resources. To support counselors and directly inform renters, larger organizations have expanded their efforts to document and disseminate information about local supports and policies. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's website was noted as being a helpful resource for staying up to date on policy changes.

Counseling providers noted ongoing concerns about scams targeting renters in crisis and ways to equip renters to avoid them. Counselors have received calls to help verify the validity of services that clients have come across, and agencies have shared guidance from the Federal Trade Commission on how to avoid COVID-19-related scams.²⁵ According to NeighborWorks, 48 percent of its network organizations reported an increase in scam activity compared with the period before the COVID-19 pandemic (NeighborWorks America 2021).

Key Takeaways

In our discussions with counseling providers, several themes emerged related to the ways that providers are responding to renters' needs and gaps in the resources that counselors and renters need during the pandemic. Some questions also emerged related to who accesses counseling services.

Virtual Counseling Services Have Some Benefits but Also Create Equity Concerns

The organizations of almost all the people we interviewed have transitioned to providing services virtually or by phone, a situation that offers some efficiencies and benefits to participants. But many renters may need additional support to access services, and counseling providers may need additional resources to effectively reach out to clients and engage them. The ability to access services by phone or online potentially reduces the amount of time a renter needs to engage in counseling and minimizes the need for participants with time and resource constraints to make trade-offs between counseling and other priorities. It also may allow providers to cover a broader geographic area and audience. However, limited access to technology, discomfort with remote services, and a lack of language- or culturally appropriate services may limit access to services for groups affected by COVID-19. This suggests that explicit targets or goals for reaching people or neighborhoods with known barriers to access are needed.

Counseling Reaches Vulnerable Renters and Communities of Color, but More Effort May Be Needed

Similarly, more work is needed to understand the extent to which housing and financial counseling services are reaching the most vulnerable communities. For example, more research needs to be done on the equity implications of broadband and technology gaps and on what funding is needed to close these gaps, as well as on the availability of services in communities with limited English proficiency. Deeper analysis is also needed to understand whether services are reaching the people and neighborhoods most affected by pandemic job losses and eviction risk. The federal government took a

crucial step toward addressing the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 by earmarking a significant portion of counseling funds to communities of color and households with low incomes. Going forward, tracking access to services by race and ethnicity and by affected neighborhood will be important, both for understanding how effectively funding reaches its intended targets and for identifying gaps.

Renters Need Rental Assistance and Financial Support to Meet Basic Needs

In contrast to the services they traditionally provide to homeowners seeking pre-purchase information or navigating foreclosure, counselors in the current crisis are helping renters maintain basic housing and financial stability in the face of job losses, evictions, and debt, primarily by connecting them to emergency supports and providing them with information. Counselors noted that compared with homeowners, renters have fewer assets, savings, and resources to help them weather financial instability. When asked what renters need most to navigate the ongoing crisis, providers universally pointed to direct rent, financial, or cash assistance and legal assistance, noting the importance of helping renters meet their basic needs before traditional housing or financial counseling approaches can be applied. Food assistance was also frequently noted as a crucial need. Only after basic needs are met and urgent crises are resolved can counselors apply more traditional housing or financial counseling models to help renters seek longer-term stability by reducing debt, improving or preserving credit, or setting and achieving financial goals.

Renters and Counselors Need Access to Both Rental Assistance and Legal Expertise

Counselors noted that staying up to date on state, local, and federal laws and housing assistance resources so they can consolidate and share that information with renters or landlords is an ongoing challenge, requiring staff time, training, access to expertise, and resources. This includes, for example, understanding and tracking the availability of various state or local rental assistance programs and understanding relevant eviction laws and court processes. Renters need legal assistance, including court diversion services so they can avoid incurring court fees, help navigating eviction moratoriums, and help understanding their rights as tenants. Providers are working to understand the housing and eviction systems so they can better inform their clients, but without dedicated resources, counseling providers are unlikely to be able to efficiently or sustainably incorporate that expertise into their service models. Partnering with other organizations, particularly those providing rental assistance or legal services to renters, and closely tracking tenant rights and resources during the pandemic could help fill housing counselors' capacity gaps. But the extent to which these services are widely available or at the scale needed is unclear.

Providers Face Funding and Capacity Constraints

Housing counseling providers do not have the capacity to tailor or expand services to meet renters' needs and noted that additional funding for staffing, training, and services is needed. Notably, agencies commented that the services they most frequently provide for renters—for example, connecting them with emergency support and food security services—do not meet HUD's requirements for housing

counseling and therefore are not covered by HUD funding. Some organizations have access to alternative funding sources to pay for these activities. But others reported that counselors were constrained in their ability to work with renters and would benefit from more flexibility in how HUD counseling funds can be used. Making the HUD housing counseling funding more flexible would better support counseling agencies during this national crisis.

Landlords May Also Need Assistance

Finally, landlords—particularly mom-and-pop landlords—are largely absent from rental counseling services, although counselors have increasingly helped mitigate landlord-tenant disputes on renters' behalf and novel approaches are in development among the larger networks with access to owners of multifamily affordable properties. Housing counseling organizations can help landlords navigate debt, preserve their credit, and avoid foreclosure. Landlords may also need support that cannot be provided by housing counseling agencies, such as addressing taxes or deferred maintenance. But no clear path exists to provide counseling or support to independent landlords and their tenants, either to bypass eviction processes, access emergency rental assistance, or address other landlord needs.

Conclusion

As the pandemic continues, millions of renters and their landlords need new resources on an unprecedented scale to navigate rental arrears and avoid widespread evictions. The housing counseling system is a promising infrastructure and framework for supporting renters in crisis. However, adapting to meet the needs of renters requires new resources, partnerships, and counseling approaches to first stabilize them and then support their long-term housing and financial stability.

Appendix. Interviewees and Their Organizations

The following organizations and staff members were interviewed for this brief.

- **CARECEN:** Anabell Martinez, Housing Director; Dora Beltran, Bilingual Housing Counselor; and Nancy Flores, Bilingual Housing Counselor
- **Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund:** John Murphy, Principal, and Tamara Lindsay, Chief of Strategy
- **GreenPath Financial Wellness:** Jennifer Fraser, Director of Stakeholder Engagement and Contact Center Operations, and Jeremy Lark, Senior Manager of Program Performance and Quality Assurance
- **Housing and Family Services of Greater New York:** Jonathan Goss, Director of Neighborhood Preservation Services

- **Housing Partnership Network:** Meaghan McCarthy, Vice President of Affordable Housing and Consumer Empowerment, and Micayla LeLugas, Associate of Consumer Empowerment and Homeownership Pathways
- **Michigan State Housing Development Authority:** Carol Brito, Program and Business Development Manager, Homeownership Division; and Veronica Depotty, Department Analyst and HUD Grant Manger
- **National Housing Resource Center:** Bruce Dorpalen, Executive Director, and Ellie Pepper, Relationship and Innovations Director
- **NeighborWorks America:** Lee Anne Adams, Senior Vice President of National Initiatives; Baylee Childress, Manager of the National Homeownership Programs and Lending; and Molly Barackman-Eder, Senior Manager of Financial Capability

Notes

- ¹ Mary K. Cunningham, Laurie Goodman and Jung Hyun Choi, “Don’t Overlook the Importance of Unemployment Benefits for Renters,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, April 23, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/dont-overlook-importance-unemployment-benefits-renters>.
- ² Jung Hyun Choi and Laurie Goodman, “Mounting Pressures on Mom-and-Pop Landlords Could Spell Trouble for the Affordable Rental Market,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, November 10, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/mounting-pressures-mom-and-pop-landlords-could-spell-trouble-affordable-rental-market>.
- ³ Jung Hyun Choi and Laurie Goodman, “Mounting Pressures on Mom-and-Pop Landlords Could Spell Trouble for the Affordable Rental Market.”
- ⁴ Laurie Goodman and Jung Hyun Choi, “Black and Hispanic Landlords Are Facing Great Financial Struggles Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. They Also Support Their Tenants at Higher Rates,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, September 4, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/black-and-hispanic-landlords-are-facing-great-financial-struggles-because-covid-19-pandemic-they-also-support-their-tenants-higher-rates>.
- ⁵ See “Temporary Halt in Residential Evictions to Prevent the Further Spread of COVID-19,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated March 29, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-eviction-declaration.html>. See also Anne Kat Alexander and Alieza Durana, “Federal Moratorium Extended, but Eviction Filings Continue,” Eviction Lab, February 9, 2021, <https://evictionlab.org/moratorium-extended-evictions-continue/>.
- ⁶ “COVID-19 Emergency Information for Housing Counselors,” HUD Exchange, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/housing-counseling/covid-19/>.
- ⁷ Solomon Greene and Samantha Batko, “What Can We Learn from New State and Local Assistance Programs for Renters Affected by COVID-19?” *Housing Matters* (blog), Urban Institute, May 6, 2020, <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/what-can-we-learn-new-state-and-local-assistance-programs-renters-affected-covid-19>.
- ⁸ “HUD Approved Housing Counseling Agencies,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.hud.gov/findacounselor>.
- ⁹ The number of households served in 2020 was calculated using information from reports on the second through fourth quarters of the 2020 federal fiscal year and the first quarter of the 2021 federal fiscal year. See “Housing

- Counseling HUD-9902 Quarterly Reports,” HUD Exchange, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/housing-counseling/9902-quarterly-reports/>.
- ¹⁰ US Department of Housing and Urban Development, “HUD Awards More Than \$12.5 Million in Housing Counseling Grants,” news release 20-177, October 20, 2020, https://www.hud.gov/press/press_releases_media_advisories/HUD_No_20_177.
- ¹¹ US Department of Housing and Urban Development, “HUD Awards Nearly \$40 Million in Housing Counseling Grants,” news release 20-080, June 16, 2020, https://www.hud.gov/press/press_releases_media_advisories/HUD_No_20_080.
- ¹² “HUD Programs Covered by the Housing Counseling: New Certification Requirements Final Rule,” HUD Exchange, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/housing-counseling/certification/covered-programs/>.
- ¹³ “Housing Counseling Program Overview,” HUD Exchange, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/housing-counseling/program-description/>.
- ¹⁴ The share of counseling services in 2019 that was devoted to rental counseling was calculated using information from reports on the second through fourth quarters of the 2019 federal fiscal year and the first quarter of the 2020 federal fiscal year. See “Housing Counseling HUD-9902 Quarterly Reports,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/housing-counseling/9902-quarterly-reports/>.
- ¹⁵ Calculation based on information available as of March 16, 2021, from “HUD Approved Housing Counseling Agencies,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- ¹⁶ “Renting,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed March 15, 2021, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/housing/sfh/hcc/rental.
- ¹⁷ Jung Hyun Choi, Laurie Goodman, and Jun Zhu, “We Must Act Quickly to Protect Millions of Vulnerable Renters,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, March 25, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/we-must-act-quickly-protect-millions-vulnerable-renters>.
- ¹⁸ “Resources for Renters,” GreenPath Financial Wellness, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.greenpath.com/renters/>.
- ¹⁹ “MSHDA: Meeting Clients’ Needs during COVID-19,” HUD Exchange, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/housing-counseling/the-bridge/2020-quarter-3/MSHDA/>.
- ²⁰ American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-2 (2021).
- ²¹ “Housing Counseling Program Impact Data Displays,” HUD Exchange, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/housing-counseling/9902/data-displays/#Income>.
- ²² Avail is a platform that helps do-it-yourself mom-and-pop landlords manage their rental properties. It conducted a survey of more than 1,200 landlords and 2,500 tenants in its service network. See Laurie Goodman and Jung Hyun Choi, “Landlords and Tenants Need More Information on Rental Assistance and Eviction Moratorium Policies,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, March 9, 2021, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/landlords-and-tenants-need-more-information-rental-assistance-and-eviction-moratorium-policies>.
- ²³ “\$4.4 Million Wells Fargo Foundation Grant Supports Innovative NFCC and HPN Renter Advantage,” National Foundation for Credit Counseling, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.nfcc.org/media-resources-center/4-4-million-wells-fargo-foundation-grant-supports-innovative-nfcc-and-hpn-renter-advantage/>.
- ²⁴ 24 CFR § 5.100 (2021).
- ²⁵ See “Coronavirus Advice for Consumers,” Federal Trade Commission, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.ftc.gov/coronavirus/scams-consumer-advice>.

References

- CFPB (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau). 2021. *Housing Insecurity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Washington, DC: CFPB.
- Cunningham, Mary K., Ananya Hariharan, and Olivia Fiol. 2021. "The Looming Eviction Cliff." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- NeighborWorks America. 2021. "COVID-19 Impact Survey Results." Presentation. Washington, DC: NeighborWorks America.
- Parrott, Jim, and Mark Zandi. 2021. "Averting an Eviction Crisis." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Sally, Corianne Payton, Camille H. Anoll, Jung Choi, Patrick Spauster, Leah Hendey, Diane K. Levy, and Bing Bai. 2018. *Responding to a Crisis: The National Foreclosure Mitigation Counseling Program, 2008–2018*. Washington, DC: NeighborWorks America.
- Walsh, John, Gideon Berger, Janneke Ratcliffe, and Sarah Gerecke. 2020. "Increasing Rental Counseling Capacity and Awareness as a Prescription for COVID-19." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

About the Authors

Martha M. Galvez is a former principal research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her expertise is in housing and homelessness policy, with a focus on examining how interventions aimed at improving housing stability and choice for low-income families are implemented and how they affect individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

Camille H. Anoll is a research analyst in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. Her work focuses on innovative community solutions to address societal inequities and the social determinants of health. With experience as a project manager in the public health sector, Anoll manages projects and teams across the Urban Institute that focus on housing, communities, and health. Anoll also leads and contributes to qualitative and quantitative research.

Abby Boshart is a policy coordinator in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. Her work focuses on housing assistance, eviction, and homelessness. She also provides communications and development support for the center and its researchers.

Acknowledgments

The Housing Crisis Research Collaborative is supported by the Wells Fargo Foundation and JPMorgan Chase & Co. and managed by the Urban Institute. We are grateful to them for allowing the collaborative to advance its goals.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We are grateful to the following organizations whose staff members spoke with us for this project: CARECEN, Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund, GreenPath Financial Wellness, Housing and Family Services of Greater New York, Housing Partnership Network, Michigan State Housing Development Authority, National Housing Resource Center, and NeighborWorks America. Thank you to our Urban Institute colleagues who supported this project by speaking with us and sharing information: Corianne Payton Scally, Mary Cunningham, Gideon Berger, and John Walsh. Thank you also to our reviewers: Mary Cunningham, Solomon Greene, and Janneke Ratcliffe of the Urban Institute; Katherine M. O’Regan at New York University’s Wagner Graduate School of Public Service; Thomas Bledsoe, Micayla LeLugas, and Meaghan McCarthy of the Housing Partnership Network; and Reed Jordan at the Wells Fargo Foundation.



500 L’Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

www.urban.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people’s lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Copyright © April 2021. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.