

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE-

September 3, 2020

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CDC Issues Federal Eviction Moratorium to Halt Spread of COVID

LITTLE ROCK, Ark., Sept. 2, 2020- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued a broad, [national moratorium on evictions](#) for nonpayment of rent from Sept. 4 until Dec. 31, 2020. Tenants seeking protection under the moratorium are required to submit a declaration to their landlord regarding their inability to make rent payments despite good faith efforts. Those who violate the order are subject to severe criminal penalties, including fines of \$100,000 or more, imprisonment, or both.

Citing the coronavirus pandemic and the increased risks that homelessness and housing instability pose for those facing eviction, the CDC order prohibits residential evictions at all stages. This sweeping order applies to residential housing regardless of whether it is funded by the federal government, unlike the previous moratorium under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act.

According to the [Stout Interactive Eviction Tool](#), which utilizes Census Bureau estimates, approximately 139,000 rental households in Arkansas were unable to make rent and are at risk for eviction as of late July. At that time, Arkansas tenants were behind on rent by an estimated \$126 million.

“Given the underlying policy behind the order, although they are not expressly mentioned, this should apply to pending evictions,” said Lynn Foster, retired UA Little Rock Law School professor and authority on landlord-tenant law. “The whole point of the order is to keep people from homelessness or having to move into crowded quarters.”

“Criminal evictions” or “failure to vacate” prosecutions should also be prohibited under the order according to Kendall Lewellen, Housing Law Practice Group Leader for the Center for Arkansas Legal Services. Arkansas is the only state in the country that provides for the criminal prosecution of tenants who are late on rent payments.

“Self-help evictions” or evictions performed by a landlord without a court order, are typically carried out by changing the locks or shutting off utilities, and are clearly illegal under Arkansas law, and under this CDC order landlords who carry these out could be subject to stiff criminal penalties.

The moratorium does not prohibit evictions for reasons other than nonpayment of rent. It also does not relieve tenants of any obligation to pay rent owed or any late fees or other penalties. This concerns housing advocates who say that allowing rent and late fees to accrue will simply delay inevitable evictions and create additional financial hardship for renters.

“Many tenants are already several months behind on their rent,” said Lewellen. “They will probably face eviction when the moratorium expires at the end of the year unless they can produce thousands of dollars for back rent. This can cause a domino effect of problems in their lives--from losing their homes, jobs, and even their children.”

In his September 2 daily COVID briefing, Governor Hutchinson noted that tenants are required under the order to make their best efforts to obtain government assistance if they are behind on rent, and urged tenants to go to their local community action agencies and community nonprofit organizations to obtain rental assistance. He also referenced rental assistance to public housing agencies through the Arkansas Development Finance Authority.

While assistance may be available, many of these programs place strict income eligibility limits on those who can receive assistance. Terry Bearden, Chief Operations Officer for the Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association, says that community action agencies limit eligibility to families whose income is within 125% of federal poverty guidelines, which is roughly \$27,150 for a family of three. “Most agencies have had to set a maximum benefit amount at between \$500 and \$650 to feel secure in their abilities to be able to serve enough people. I fear that those amounts will not be enough to pay past due rent amounts and several agencies have already exhausted available funding for this year,” she said.

Rental assistance is also hard to find. There is currently no centralized clearinghouse of available resources for renters who are struggling to pay rent. “It’s all piecemeal,” said Foster. “The accident of where one lives may determine whether they can even get any real help at all.”

Landlords are also concerned about how they will be able to make ends meet without comprehensive rental assistance. Mark Robertson of Little Rock is a small property owner and worries about what this will mean for him and his tenants. “If any of my four tenants don’t pay

rent, I lose everything,” he said. “My bank doesn’t care and wouldn’t even discuss a deferment in my mortgage so I could try to help my tenants. Insurance won’t help. Taxes are not being deferred or waived. I’m not alone.”

To avoid eviction, a tenant or resident must submit a declaration to their landlord that includes: statements about their efforts to obtain government assistance, their income, their inability to pay rent due to loss of income or work or significant medical expenses, their efforts to try to make full or partial rent payments, and the likelihood that eviction would cause them to live in a homeless shelter or another residence that would place them in close quarters with others. The CDC order includes a form declaration, which must be signed under penalty of perjury.

The Center for Arkansas Legal Services and Legal Aid of Arkansas will provide a sample declaration and instructions on their statewide website at www.arlegalservices.org. Free legal assistance may be available for affected tenants. Individuals in Central, Southern, and Western Arkansas may apply for assistance from the Center for Arkansas Legal Services at call 501-376-3423 or visit www.ArkansasLegal.org. Individuals in Northwest Arkansas, North Central Arkansas, as well as the Jonesboro and West Memphis areas can apply for assistance from Legal Aid of Arkansas at 1-800-952-9243 or www.arlegalaid.org.

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About the Center for Arkansas Legal Services and Legal Aid of Arkansas

There are only two organizations in Arkansas that provide free civil legal services, the Center for Arkansas Legal Services and Legal Aid of Arkansas. Together these non-profit organizations serve all 75 counties in Arkansas and provide free legal services to low-income Arkansans with civil legal problems, including criminal record sealing, eviction defense, foreclosure prevention, consumer issues, housing, help for victims of domestic abuse, and representation in public benefits.