March 20, 2024

The Urgent Need for a Swift and Trauma-Informed Emergency Financial Assistance in Minnesota

Senate Housing and Homelessness Prevention Committee
Chair Port, Vice Chair Bolden, and Ranking Minority Lead Lucero,

Subject: S.F. 4704 - Workgroup on Expediting Emergency Rental Assistance

Dear Committee Members,

The SHIP Collaborative is writing to you as concerned citizens and advocates for the well-being of individuals facing housing instability in Minnesota. The current state of evictions in our state is alarming, with record levels reported statewide, including in Greater Minnesota. The predominant cause for eviction filings is non-payment of rent, highlighting a critical need for an expedited, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive Emergency Financial Assistance program.

We commend the proposed legislation developed by the Workgroup on Expedited Emergency Rental Assistance (WERA) aimed at addressing issues within the emergency financial assistance programs and would like to emphasize the importance of making access to Emergency Assistance (EA), Emergency General Assistance (EGA), Family Homeless Prevention and Assistance Program (FHPAP) faster and timelier. We suggest enhancing this bill by incorporating a more comprehensive trauma-informed approach to Emergency Financial Assistance programs. This will not only expedite the application process but also provide a more empathetic and supportive experience when applying for Emergency Financial Assistance. Please take into strong consideration the following additions to SF 4704:

Single Application Portal
Developing a universally accessible online platform for Emergency Financial Assistance applications is a commendable step. A coordinated platform for Family Homelessness Prevention and Assistance Program (FHPAP), Emergency Assistance (EA), and Emergency General Assistance (EGA) will simplify the process for both participants and staff. By minimizing redundant paperwork and streamlining information gathering, stress on applicants can be significantly reduced.

Trauma-Informed Design:
Implementing a trauma-informed approach in all communications and interactions is crucial. Emergency situations are inherently sensitive, and clear, empathetic language in forms and communications can make a significant difference in the experience of those seeking assistance.

Diverse Access Points:
Establishing multiple access points for application submission, including online, in-person, and via phone, ensures inclusivity and accommodates varying preferences and needs. Collaboration with community organizations to support applicants in completing applications is an essential component.

Culturally Competent Assistance:
Cultural competence is vital in addressing the diverse backgrounds of applicants. Staff training and language assistance services should be prioritized to eliminate language barriers and ensure that assistance is accessible to all.

Transparent Eligibility Criteria:
Clearly communicating eligibility criteria and providing detailed information on required documentation will help manage expectations, reduce confusion, and alleviate applicants' anxiety.

Fast-Track Processing:
Implementing expedited processing for emergency cases through technology automation will ensure swift assistance to those in immediate need.

Cost Implications:
Initial implementation costs, technology maintenance, staffing considerations during peak times, and community outreach programs should be factored into the budget for the successful execution of the programs.

Evaluation and Continuous Improvements:
Allocating funds for periodic evaluations and improvements based on feedback from applicants and stakeholders will ensure the system remains responsive and supportive.

In conclusion, the proposed legislation is a commendable effort, and we thank Chair Port for championing it. We urge you to consider the suggested enhancements to create a more compassionate and efficient system that truly supports individuals during times of crisis. The upfront investment in technology, training, and community outreach is essential for the long-term success of the programs too.

Thank you for your time and dedication to addressing this critical issue. We trust that, with your support, we can significantly impact the lives of those facing housing instability in our great state.

Sincerely,

Stable Housing is the Priority (SHIP) Collaborative Members