

MY TURN

Protect families from homelessness; extend eviction moratorium



BY GUEST COMMENTARY

MAY 4, 2021



Demonstrators hold up a banner in front of an apartment building in the Adams Point neighborhood of Oakland to protest rent payment and evictions during the coronavirus pandemic on Dec. 5, 2020. Photo by Anne Wernikoff for CalMatters

IN SUMMARY

Although California has an eviction moratorium in place, saving millions from losing their homes, this protection ends in June.

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By Miriam Yupanqui, Special to CalMatters

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I live and work in Silicon Valley, one of the most expensive places to live in the country. According to Zillow, the [average price of a home](#) is \$1.3 million.

But buried deep in this large swath of land, known for its dynamism and innovation, is East Palo Alto, a working-class Latino community where my extended family still lives.

During a pandemic where giant tech corporations saw record-breaking profits, people in my community saw record-breaking panic. High transmission rates of COVID-19 among the Latino community came because of factors like pre-existing health conditions, type of employment and overcrowded housing.

As someone who grew up in a multigenerational working-class household, the scene playing out in East Palo Alto and other Latino Silicon Valley neighborhoods is one I understand. Families in these households were faced with the most challenging decision this past year - stay home to avoid exposure to the virus or lose the paycheck that helps pay the nearly unaffordable rent.

Right now, California has protective legislation in place that prohibits eviction and foreclosure for nonpayment of rent or mortgage during the COVID-19 period. It also eliminates debt for tenants who were unable to pay rent during the pandemic. Finally, it compensates small landlords and non-

profit housing operators who need assistance to ensure housing stability for their tenants.

Although California has these protections in place, saving millions of Californians from losing homes by protecting tenants from evictions due to missed rent, this protection ends in June. Hope is on the horizon with vaccination rates ticking up, but the financial impact of COVID-19 rages on.

This problem is echoed across the state as [Californians have lost more jobs](#) during COVID-19 than during the Great Recession, and unemployment is higher among Californians of color.

The urgency to extend eviction protections could not come at a more crucial time, especially since many of the people I serve at [Nuestra Casa](#), a local non-profit serving the Latino community in Silicon Valley, have lost jobs and have no income. [Rent debt is growing](#) at a staggering rate.

Unfortunately, this crisis requires systemic, longer-term interventions. At a minimum, California must extend the moratorium past June for people still impacted by the pandemic. Many people will not be able to return to work by then.

At a local level, thousands in San Mateo County receive support from robust rental assistance programs. But the scale of this problem is beyond those programs' scope, and these resources are quickly exhausted. The application process is also complicated, especially for residents with limited time and English proficiency.

One step in the right direction is the California Legislature's approval of [Senate Bill 91](#). SB 91 authorizes the use of \$2.6 billion in federal funds to pay landlords rent owed by qualifying tenants with COVID-19 financial hardships. Some of these funds will also go to organizations with deep roots in communities, like Nuestra Casa, to help tenants complete complicated rental assistance applications.

By extending the moratorium, we can ensure that rental assistance money achieves its intended purpose, preventing homelessness and getting money into the pockets of landlords who need it.

As a next step to address what was already a severe housing crisis before COVID-19, why not apply the same approach to keeping people housed during the pandemic? California can be a leader in a model that prioritizes getting the rent paid, preventing evictions and reducing homelessness, rather than prioritizing speedy evictions where landlords do not get the rent money owed.

If we don't continue these interventions, vulnerable families living in Silicon Valley will be pushed out for good. They will be forced to choose between food or housing. Evictions will also increase the spread of COVID-19 and other health conditions, further harming all of us.

California can do the right thing. It can choose to look away and let this problem fester in our communities. Or it can choose people like my family and my neighbors - renters, homeowners, small landlords and essential workers.

Because in the Golden State, the 5th largest economy in the world, everyone deserves a place to call home.

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