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California relief effort works to prevent eviction crisis in Bay Area



(<https://stanforddaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/rvs.jpg>)

RVs along El Camino Real. 57% of all renters in East Palo Alto are rent-burdened, which means they spend more than 30% of their income on rent. (Photo: WILLIAM MENG/The Stanford Daily)

By Luc Alvarez (<https://stanforddaily.com/author/luc/>)

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Communities neighboring Stanford and across California could face a tidal wave of evictions if cash-strapped tenants don't make use of a temporary and largely unknown state rental assistance program that expires on April 1, according to two legal aides on the front lines of the crisis.



Since California's eviction moratorium ended on Oct. 1 (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB832), the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (https://housing.ca.gov/covid_rr/index.html) (ERAP) is the only major state program still in place to help struggling renters. Tenants across the state rely on ERAP, but it is particularly vital for low-income residents — including in Palo Alto, where the median income is over \$158,000 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/paloaltocitycalifornia/INC110219>), and its historically redlined, lower-income neighbor East Palo Alto.

Housing advocates, however, say ERAP is likely to be underutilized because of a lack of knowledge about the program and accessibility to the legal process.

Laura Rubio, an East Palo Alto resident, housing activist and community leader, fears that thousands of East Palo Alto renters may face eviction despite being eligible for ERAP funding. “I’m worried for these families,” Rubio said in an October interview conducted in Spanish. “I see tenants from East Palo Alto facing eviction, and leaders and organizations working to try to keep our community in their home.”

“East Palo Alto is the only home that many of us families know,” Rubio said.

If all eligible renters apply for ERAP, there will be very few evictions across California, according to Justin Tarricone, a housing attorney for [Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto](https://clsepa.org) (<https://clsepa.org>). “But we know that a lot of families are scared to apply for rental assistance or they don’t know about the assistance that’s available,” Tarricone said.

ERAP covers up to 100 percent of unpaid rent (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB832) from April 1, 2020 to April 1, 2022, with a total of \$5.2 billion (<https://calmatters.org/housing/2021/06/california-eviction-moratorium-deal/>) available to tenants across the state. Renters are only eligible for the program, however, if they can prove financial hardship due to the pandemic, a threat of housing insecurity without rent assistance and make below 80 percent of their area’s median income, as determined (<https://www.hcd.ca.gov/grants-funding/active-funding/erap/docs/state-rental-assistance-program-general-info-and-guidance-to-web.pdf>) by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The program is important to cash-strapped renters relying on ERAP to avoid eviction after [California’s eviction moratorium ended](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB832) (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB832) on Oct. 1. Its expiration will allow landlords to

evict tenants for failing to pay rent — a process which has already begun, according to Lauren Zach, a Stanford Community Law Clinic Litigation and Advocacy Fellow.

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Following the expiration of the state eviction moratorium, there was an increase in eviction lawsuit filings given the modification of renter protections, Zach said in an October interview with The Daily. “Whether this leads to an increase in evictions will depend on the capacity of nonprofits, community groups and legal aid organizations to support vulnerable tenants who are facing lawsuits in enforcing the protections available to them,” she said.

As part of this effort to support struggling renters, Tarricone and his colleagues have collaborated with community partners to clear up any misconceptions about ERAP and raise awareness for the program. Specifically, the advocates want tenants to know that they can’t be evicted if they’re currently seeking rental assistance, that they can apply for rental assistance that’s owed from after Oct. 1 through ERAP and that both documented and undocumented Californians are eligible for the program.

As of late October, 643 East Palo Alto families had already taken advantage of the relief money, with an average of \$11,000 going to each household, according to Rubio. This relief is desperately needed for a community where 54 percent (https://www.cityofepa.org/sites/default/files/fileattachments/housing/page/19915/c2_abag_mtc_housing_needs_data_report_east_palo_alto_w_to_c_1.pdf) of tenants are rent-burdened. Even in neighboring wealthy Palo Alto, 37 percent (<https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/files/assets/public/agendas-minutes-reports/agendas-minutes/planning-and-transportation-commission/2021/ptc-4.28-renter-protection.pdf>) of renters are rent-burdened.

“Renter protections are deeply important to [rent-burdened tenants] because they’re the ones who are most at risk for homelessness,” said Angie Evans, co-founder of the Palo Alto Renters’ Association, a citizens’ group seeking non-profit status.

Despite the lack of affordable housing amid a pandemic, many residents remain unaware of their struggling neighbors. In conversations with nearly a dozen Palo Alto residents, all but one were unaware of anyone at risk of eviction.

Evans attributed the lack of awareness to a disconnect between homeowners and renters in her community, believing that renters are not adequately represented in Palo Alto government. The Palo Alto Housing



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Element Board, a City Council–appointed group, includes only one market-rate renter among its 15 members, according to Evans.

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Palo Alto resident Eddie Washington said he has noticed worsening anxiety over the housing crisis in his neighbors. “You see it in people’s faces: stress,” Washington said, sitting outside his Taverna, a local restaurant owned by his friend, on a rainy Friday morning. “Nobody wants to say hello; nobody wants to make eye contact; nobody smiles — it’s not a happy place.”

Evans also said that renters like her family have been neglected by Palo Alto schools.

“65 percent of Palo Alto school students are renters. I’ve never seen a single email from the school district or from my daughter’s elementary school sharing resources for renters,” Evans said. “This is little stuff that a community can do to make sure that renters feel part of the community and get access to the resources they need.”

East Palo Alto City Councilman Antonio Lopez Ph.D. ’25 also feels that renters are overlooked in his community. Lopez said he sees this most clearly in what he believes was a premature end to the state eviction moratorium — an opinion shared by others on the frontlines of the eviction crisis like Zach and Tarricone.

“Who are we prioritizing this pandemic? Who are the people that are valued fully? Is it the low-income people? Because if it is, it doesn’t seem like that,” Lopez said. “I don’t accept and don’t understand why we don’t have the political will and the wherewithal to create housing.”

Zach hopes that in the future, more attention and support can be given to California renters and some form of ERAP can be adopted indefinitely.

“I think the really interesting thing is that COVID created this protection that we would have previously never imagined possible, but which makes sense at all times,” Zach said. Even beyond the pandemic, “if you can’t pay your rent for reasons that are not your fault, maybe the state should step in and make sure you’re not homeless,” Zach added.

To Tarricone, Zach’s idea is politically improbable. Instead, he said many renters will be left in the same situation starting April 1, 2022 (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB832), that they were in before the pandemic. Then, their landlord can give them just a three-day notice before filing an eviction case — one of the fastest-moving types of lawsuits in California.



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Zach, too, said she is not optimistic that rental protection will last beyond the pandemic for low-income residents. “My feeling is fear and worry and just trying to keep under roofs,” Zach said.

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