

# The Journal News Sunday

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## Despite backlog, NY ends \$2.4B rent relief program

### State hoping for federal funds to accommodate more applicants

**Eduardo Cuevas**

Rockland/Westchester Journal News | USA TODAY NETWORK

Heading into the fall, Angela Washington's blood pressure was high.

"Like 190 over 160," she recalled, far higher than the 120 systolic and 80 diastolic physicians consider healthy.

High blood pressure runs in the Mount Vernon resident's family. But like millions across the U.S., Washington, 57, owed thousands in rent.

Her hours were cut as a health home aide during the pandemic. For about eight months, Washington struggled to make the \$2,400 rent for her apartment, which she shared with her daughter and a family friend before they moved out. Washington paid what she could.

The stress elevated her blood pressure. Having taken care of others throughout her career, spanning 24 years, Washington needed help.

In July, she applied for New York state's rent relief program through Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, a nonprofit. Months passed, and she prayed. Then around her birthday, Oct. 23, Washington said she got a present: a year's worth of rent went to her landlord. She's also doing better with her blood pressure, which she's been treating with new medication.

"It's a huge relief," Washington said. "That's why they call it rent relief."

Others might not get the same aid. On Sunday, New York closed its \$2.4 billion Emergency Rental Assistance Program to much of the state as tenants have overwhelmed the system. Officials hope the federal government will help.

After being one of the slowest states to roll out its program, New York has paid or promised \$2.1 billion to landlords. Slightly under half has directly been paid, while \$1.1 billion still needs more paperwork from landlords.



**Angela Washington, 57, at her Mount Vernon apartment. In July, she applied for New York state's rent relief program. Months passed, but in October, she got word that a year's worth of rent went to her landlord.**

The state has received more than 280,000 applications since June. In recent weeks, officials warned about the program running out of funds.

"While New York accelerated getting rent relief out the door and moved from the back of the pack to the front amongst other states, there are still many individuals in need of assistance," Gov. Kathy Hochul said in a statement.

In an email, officials estimated up to 80,000 applications currently won't be funded without federal assistance.

Hochul has requested nearly \$1 billion from the Treasury Department from states that haven't spent all their allocated rent relief funds. Pending this, New York state closed most applications to its program.

The decision effectively ends rental assistance to low-income tenants earning under 80% of the area median income during the pandemic.

However, residents in areas of the state that haven't spent all their allocated funds can still apply. This includes Westchester County — excluding Yonkers — along with Long Island and a handful of smaller counties in western and upstate New York. State officials don't expect these areas to exhaust their aid through November.

Statewide, households within 80% to 120% of the area median income can also apply.

The assistance can pay up to a year's worth of back rent, including utilities, and three months going forward. Separately, landlords whose tenants refused to apply for rent relief can get their own aid until Saturday.

In a letter, 17 members of New York's Democratic congressional delegation called on Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen to reallocate funds toward the state's program.

(See Reverse Side)

Rep. Jamaal Bowman, Yonkers Democrat who signed the letter, worried about an increase in the number of people becoming homeless without more aid.

"We had a housing crisis even prior to the pandemic," Bowman said. Ensuring that people can remain housed and make their rent payments, while also ensuring landlords can make their mortgage payments, is essential as we rebound from this pandemic."

In Westchester, the state has paid landlords more than \$19 million as of Nov. 9. This broke down to nearly 1,400 payments, averaging about \$13,800, state figures showed.



"It's a huge relief," Angela Washington said of the rent relief funding that went to her landlord, thanks to a new York state program. "That's why they call it rent relief." SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS



"It's really a crisis situation with so many people living on the edge," said Dennis Hanratty, executive director of Mount Vernon United Tenants, which helps tenants apply for rent relief. JOURNAL NEWS FILE

Meanwhile, Yonkers, with its own program, halted applications.

"We've already exceeded the expenditure mark set by the Treasury Department," Mayor Mike Spano said in a statement, "and our hope is our state delegation continues to push for additional resources from the federal government so we can continue to successfully fund this program for our residents."

Local providers still see need. Even with a state eviction moratorium in

place through Jan. 15 for people who lost income due to the pandemic, Westchester has the most eviction filings for 2020 and 2021 outside of New York City, court data showed.

"It's really a crisis situation with so many people living on the edge," said Dennis Hanratty, the executive director of Mount Vernon United Tenants, a state-designated organi-

zation tasked with helping tenants across Westchester apply for relief. "The slightest thing goes wrong and then they're behind on the eight ball."

The Mount Vernon nonprofit, based in a third-floor office above a shoe store, now has two full-time staff dedicated to processing applications. To date, they've helped more than 300 tenants get relief.

Hanratty doesn't expect the number of renters applying to subsidize soon, making the eviction moratorium's end date even more looming.

In courts, evictions are largely on hold. Applying for rent relief is a legal protection for tenants that typically pushes the next court date until after the moratorium ends.

Months ago, Michelle Jones, 52, received an email marked important with a star. Mount Vernon United Tenants let her know she and her boyfriend were protected from eviction because she applied for rent relief for their one-bedroom apartment.

Her hours were cut in her billing job. Her boyfriend lost work. Rent — \$1,040 monthly — loomed.

Then, three weeks ago, the state paid 10 months of rent, including until January. Costs for food and other items have gone up, but back-rent is one less worry.

"It really works," she said. "It's going to take awhile, but just have patience."

Without rent relief applications, renters can still file hardship declarations attesting they've been affected by the pandemic, according to Marcie Kobak, the director of litigation at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley.

Still, it's one less chance to pay off debt. And as it stands, protections are finite.

"It all goes out the window on Jan. 15," Kobak said. "It's a cliff."

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"We had a housing crisis even prior to the pandemic," Rep. Jamaal Bowman said. "Ensuring that people can remain housed and make their rent payments, while also ensuring landlords can make their mortgage payments, is essential as we rebound from this pandemic." EDUARDO MUNOZ ALVAREZ/AP