



Christopher Nunn,
Commissioner

For Immediate Release

November 29, 2021

Contact: Adrion Bell
Director, Marketing & Communications
Email: adrion.bell@dca.ga.gov
Phone: 470 580-1323

Georgia Commissioner Releases Statement on State's Rental Assistance

Atlanta, Ga. - Since March 2021, the State of Georgia has distributed nearly \$50 million in emergency rental assistance (ERA), which is more than any of the other thirteen distinct ERA programs that comprise a system of support in our state.

Managed by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Georgia Rental Assistance program initially focused on serving 147 counties that did not directly receive federal funds. Twelve metropolitan areas received separate funds and established their respective programs. Under a mutual agreement, DCA committed to serving the rest of the state while coordinating closely with the 12 metropolitan programs. DCA advocated for program design and ensured additional funds would be made available should local funds be exhausted. Less than 2 months after this unprecedented relief effort was announced, DCA hired staff, negotiated office space, contracted with statewide partners, formulated a marketing plan, and implemented an online portal, in an effort to be one of the first to launch the new rental assistance program.

As of the most recently available U.S Department of the Treasury report, Georgia's system, of 13 ERA programs, has collectively distributed \$134 million to 27,528 Georgia families. From these figures, Georgia ranks among the top third of all states and territories in terms of both funds distributed and families assisted. It is worth noting that Georgia's relative ranking reflects:

- a) a lower average rent and utility payment (\$6,200 for DCA, \$4,800 statewide), compared to high-cost states like New York, New Jersey, Illinois, and California;
- b) fewer applications for assistance, in part attributable to the state's unemployment rate (currently 3.2%) which has consistently trended lower than any large state by 2 to 3%; and
- c) an ethos among many Georgians to pay rent first by any means possible.



Christopher Nunn,
Commissioner

To date, DCA has expended 10% of its available funds. Some have cited this percentage as an indicator of poor program performance; however, further review is necessary to provide clarity, context, and perspective. First, any such mischaracterization assumes a data-driven rationale for Georgia's total allocation. This data is non-existent, nor were ERA funds indexed to unemployment like other state and local stimulus funds. This explains why Georgia received the 8th largest state allocation of ERA funds, yet a significantly different allocation of state and local fiscal recovery funds, which are more flexible to address community needs. Second, critics ignore the fact that we have a statewide system of 13 programs. In fact, these programs together have distributed 21 % of available funds, which is relatively consistent with other states that have lower unemployment rates.

DCA remains committed to using all available funds to assist every Georgian in need. Since first launching its program, we have continuously improved and instituted lessons learned to increase program effectiveness while preventing fraud. DCA has worked closely with the Treasury to align with all federal guidelines, which are complex and continuously evolving. While DCA has no authority to waive application requirements, we have streamlined these requirements to enable submission not only via an online portal, but also through the submission of paper applications that can either be faxed or mailed to DCA. There is a call center available to respond to questions and the immediate needs of applicants. While DCA has streamlined compliance to a significant extent, ERA was not designed like other federal stimulus programs and cannot provide instantaneous benefits without an application and supporting documentation.

To reach those facing an imminent threat of eviction, DCA engaged the magistrate courts early in the program. Any application for assistance that is flagged with an eviction filing is given priority handling. Georgia has 159 magistrate courts many of which are connected to the State ERA program with judges committed to directing tenants and landlords to the program. Through multiple touchpoints with the courts and priority handling for applications with pending evictions, DCA has helped thousands of tenants avoid eviction. Further, DCA funds Georgia Legal Services to provide hands-on legal assistance to those involved in eviction proceedings.

From the inception of a hastily launched, statewide program, DCA has been continually focused on improving outreach and processing capabilities. To the uninitiated, this seems easy; however, when people, technology, and statewide reach are concerned, the reality is more of an evolution. DCA employs numerous traditional and social media marketing tools and techniques, yet when it became apparent that the outreach and technical assistance needs would be greater than first anticipated, we augmented the online portal, call center, and community partner agency network with additional



Christopher Nunn,
Commissioner

resources, including a team of 15 statewide marketing and outreach professionals to directly target individuals in need. Using mapping resources to target areas with high renter populations, the outreach team has engaged more than 5,000 individuals. Additionally, this team has connected with our faith-based communities and attended local, regional, community, and government-sponsored events, in our schools, public libraries, and other public venues alongside our community partners. DCA continues to recruit, train, and compensate an expanding network of community partners – such as the Salvation Army and United Way – who are the backbone of the program and are expected to provide on-the-ground assistance for those in need of help with the application process.

DCA continues to implement strategies to achieve its stated goal of a three-to-four-week application turnaround, or faster if both the tenant and landlord are responsive and thoroughly complete their application. This turnaround time was impacted by a significant uptick in applications as DCA expanded to serve all 159 counties, including the metro areas served by other programs, to ensure all needs were satisfied. To address the demand, we have expanded our staffing and weekend hours, and recently, DCA repurposed and trained more than 30 staff from other programs to assist with application processing. Also, based on a recent change in Treasury guidance, the State has embraced the option of voluntarily reallocating funds to local jurisdictions and has already allocated additional funding to several high-performing jurisdictions. This enables us to harness additional processing capabilities to distribute funds faster in those jurisdictions and is but one example of the partnership that exists within the state.

DCA's staff and I remain committed to helping qualified renters remain in their homes. I encourage Georgians in need to apply for assistance with the confidence that we will continue to work diligently to provide up to 18 months of past-due rent and utility payments, regardless of the amount. I also encourage Georgians to take advantage of the recertification process that allows for future rental assistance.

Apply online at georgiarentalassistance.ga.gov or for assistance, contact us at rentalassistance@dca.ga.gov or (833) 827-7368.



Christopher Nunn,
Commissioner

About the Department of Community Affairs

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) partners with communities to build strong and vibrant neighborhoods, commercial and industrial areas through community and economic development, local government assistance, and safe and affordable housing. Using state and federal resources, DCA helps communities spur private job creation, implement planning, develop downtowns, generate affordable housing solutions and promote volunteerism. DCA also helps qualified Georgians with low and moderate incomes buy homes, rental housing and prevent foreclosure and homelessness. For more information, visit www.dca.ga.gov.