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Opinion

Opinion: Lawmakers must act to prevent mass displacement and homelessness

Updated Nov 18, 2020; Posted Nov 18, 2020



Legislators must take action to help protect Oregonians facing potential homelessness and growing food insecurity, the authors write. Friday, July 24, 2020 John Jones | For NJ Advance Medi

By Guest Columnist

Susannah Morgan, Jan Musgrove Elfers and Sybil Hebb

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This pandemic has taught many of us how important our homes are. They provide us a place to stay safe from COVID-19, to rest or to heal. They provide us with a place where our kids can learn. Safe, stable housing is the best prescription during a global pandemic — and without it, thousands of additional families will face hunger and poverty in the coming months.

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It is clear that Oregon's statewide eviction and foreclosure moratorium has been one of our most successful remedies for communities bearing the brunt of the pandemic. As the unemployment system has struggled under the tsunami of claims and nearly 100,000 people are still waiting for their benefits, the moratorium is a lifeline. It has been especially critical for Oregonians of color who have experienced disproportionate hunger, poverty, illness and job loss for generations due to persistent economic and racial inequities.

Oregon must take action to prevent a new wave of mass displacement and homelessness as we enter the coldest months of winter. The state's eviction moratorium is set to expire on Dec. 31, just as federal food assistance for tens of thousands of Oregonians ends and as we grapple with a new wave of COVID-prompted closures and shutdowns. Reducing social and commercial activity in the face of

skyrocketing hospitalizations will save lives but will also inevitably bring another round of job losses and reduced hours for many workers. With no additional federal relief in sight, Oregon must stand up now for families and communities.

In spite of economic hardship, the overwhelming majority of Oregonians are managing to pay their full rent on time — but not without significant sacrifice as the Oregonian/OregonLive has reported. Oregon State University estimates that hunger in Oregon has doubled since the start of the pandemic. Around half of Oregonians who rent their home report having to borrow money or cut back on food or medicine to pay for housing, according to a survey by Portland State University and the Community Alliance of Tenants. The U.S. Census Household Pulse survey shows one in five families with children said they were not confident they could make November's rent — forcing parents who are juggling work and at-home education to choose between feeding their families or losing their homes. The impact is even greater for Oregonians of color: 40% of Hispanic/Latino renters and 30% of Black renters say the same.

Further evidence of the need for action: Last week in Bend, a man froze to death because of long wait lists at local shelters. In Southern Oregon, low-income community members face the dual impact of COVID and wildfire displacement. And Multnomah County has already warned that there aren't enough shelter beds that meet COVID safety criteria.

This is a crisis for hundreds of thousands of Oregonians — disrupting lives, increasing food insecurity and worsening homelessness in our communities. If displaced families are crowded into shelters or forced to move in with relatives or friends, a sharp increase in COVID cases will no doubt follow —further straining our health care system.

With the clock ticking on existing protections and economic instability on the rise, our shared values call upon us to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable. Lawmakers must extend the eviction moratorium at least through the school year — and pass meaningful rent relief and foreclosure protections that help both tenants and property owners. There is no time to waste.

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