

Yonkers' emergency rental assistance application is closed, but agencies are still helping

Agencies are referring Yonkers residents who still need help to the Department of Social Services and finding other ways to get them assistance.

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- Yonkers expects to grant a total of \$14.5 million in rental assistance through September 2022.



In the past year and a half, Athena Dollar has seen one setback after another.

The 40-year-old mother of two and disabled veteran was furloughed from her job at REI for about three months when the pandemic hit.

By the summer, a few months later, she was back at work. But the three months she was unemployed

"really knocked the wind out of my sails," she said.

Then the location where she worked in the Ridge Hill Mall in Yonkers closed and she was relocated to the store in Soho, in New York City. But there, she was given fewer hours and had to gradually work up to getting more.

And when one of her daughters got COVID-19 she had to miss work to take care of her, which set her back even more.

"I was just trying to keep my head above water," Dollar said.

The small amount of disability she gets, some quick assistance from the VA and the stimulus checks still weren't enough to make ends meet.

She said she "felt sickened" by the months she could only put \$100 or \$200 toward rent.

After applying for Yonkers Emergency Rental Assistance Program, Dollar was surprised to learn she was eligible to receive help.

She was blown away when the program paid the rent she owed.

"Now I'm not lagging behind," she said.

Yonkers application period closed

Applications are no longer being accepted for Yonkers' Emergency Rental Assistance Program because the city anticipates the number of applications it has left to review — around 900 — will likely use up the rest of the funding it expects to receive in September, City Hall Communications Director Christina Gilmartin said in an email.

As of July 31, Yonkers approved about 100 applications for the ERAP program, totaling \$1.5 million, Gilmartin said.

That amount is part of \$5.9 million the city is receiving in the first round of funding. Another \$8.6 million should become available to the city in early September.

The money comes from the U.S. Department of Treasury as part of the American Rescue Plan. Yonkers expects to grant a total of \$14.5 million in rental assistance through September 2022.

On top of what many considered to be a slow rollout in federal rental assistance, people like Dollar have faced uncertainty over how long eviction moratoriums would last.

The state ban on evictions expired Tuesday, though Gov. Kathy Hochul convened the state Legislature, which extended the moratorium to January 2022 on Wednesday. The federal ban, which was set to expire Oct. 3, was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court last week.

Gilmartin said the city "is advocating for more federal aid and also asking NYS to open their program to Yonkers resident(s) who haven't already applied to the Yonkers program."

Part of the reason applications for the program are closed is because "we don't want to give false hope," said Grace Perry, director of The Bridge Fund of Westchester, one of the organizations working with the city to administer the program.

"We had to stop it somewhere," Perry said, adding that the next round of funding is basically already spent.

Perry said The Bridge received about 600 screening forms – forms people filled out to see if they were eligible for the program.

Her staff has been working through them in batches, asking follow-up questions and determining if people are eligible to apply. They have about 100 applications they've been working through to get people assistance. Of those 100 some have already received checks: a few in July and around 20 or 30 in August, Perry said.

"The reality is that we need more money," Perry said. "We would love to be able to help everybody."

While her staff is working as fast as they can, the process from application to getting a check requires a lot of reviewing of documents and a lot of patience.

Perry and the other agencies working on distributing the funds have spent hours figuring out how to maximize the money, to make sure the most vulnerable are helped and that people are staying in their home communities, she said.

Delores Palmer, the director of housing services at Westchester Residential Opportunities, said people are still reaching out for help even though the application period is closed.

While the application process is closed for most people, there is one exception the Yonkers program has allowed: People can still apply if they are just now getting denied by the state program and being told to apply to Yonkers' program.

Like the city of Rochester and Monroe County, Yonkers chose to distribute the money on its own, meaning city residents need to apply to the Yonkers program, not the state's.

Palmer said there are other resources they can connect people with if people don't qualify for Yonkers ERAP and still need help.

Some people who don't qualify for Yonkers' program may have stopped reporting to work because they were scared of catching COVID-19, Palmer said. If they didn't put in for

leave, but just stopped going to work, "then those households have a harder time proving that they were impacted by COVID."

She's seen other scenarios where people don't qualify because they stayed home to take care of an elderly parent for fear their parent would be exposed to COVID-19 if taken care of by someone else.

Palmer said they refer people to the Department of Social Services to see if they can get help there. If they can't, Westchester Residential Opportunities can pull from a different pool of funds they have.

If DSS can only cover so many months a person owes, Palmer said, Westchester Residential Opportunities may be able to cover the difference.

A waiting game

When Roosevelt Corner's building manager raises his voice about him paying his rent, the 61-year-old former bus driver doesn't blame him.

The bills have piled up.

But Corner says it's not his fault either. Before, Corner and his wife had never missed rent in the three years they'd been in their one-bedroom apartment in Yonkers.

Corner was a New York City bus driver for over 20 years, the last 16 on the night shift. He has a pension. But in late 2019, he had to stop driving because of his coronary heart disease, which left him unable to breathe during a morning route that made him pull his bus over.

Eventually, Corner applied for disability in January 2020. His pension would kick in six months after. Then came the pandemic, delaying money to pay rent.

"I'm living in their household not paying rent," he said. "Like I said, I had no control over this."

"I don't like this no more than you do," he recalled telling the manager.

The manager connected Corner with the Hudson Valley Justice Center. Together, they have sought to work out a resolution in court. Corner has an application with the Yonkers' Emergency Rental Assistance Program.

He's waiting to hear from the program, which could pay up to one year in rent.

Corner has delayed a double bypass surgery — an open-chest procedure that would repair the arteries to his heart — partly because he's worried about paying what he owes, and also due to the increased number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals. He'd like to get back to playing basketball on Sunday mornings, a tradition he's had with his family.

It's one step at a time, first with his housing. Rental assistance would help.

"That would take a lot of the burden off me," he said. "If they don't approve me as far as helping with the rent, there's no way I could come up with that kind of money right now."

The hope for many people, including Corner, is to get back to stability.

For Dollar, who already received assistance, things are looking up.

"I don't need forever help," Dollar said. She just needed to catch up from the few months she wasn't able to work.

And she's grateful for the help: "I'm caught up and doing great."

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