

Rent assistance program, plan to review law enforcement policies

LOCAL NEWS

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Riverside County officials on Friday said they're responding to the coronavirus pandemic, economic recovery and racial inequity as intertwined issues that must be addressed in tandem.

One means of doing so will be a rent relief program of up to \$3,500 for both landlords and tenants, said Board of Supervisors Chair V. Manuel Perez, noting that institutional racism has impacted housing, education and jobs.

The program will provide up to three months of financial aid, with no repayment required, benefitting up to 10,000 households. The only qualification is documentation that you couldn't pay rent due to the pandemic, Perez said.

"Now we also have to deal with institutional racism, and the fact that that's been over our heads, our dark cloud, for centuries," he said. "But through this rental assistance program, it's one way in which the county of Riverside is proud to support its people."

People can apply for money from the Riverside County Rental Relief Fund regardless of whether they live in a city or unincorporated area. Applications will open June 22.

It will be funded with up to \$30 million available to the county under the CARES Act, as well as with help from two nonprofits, Perez said.

The chair also said he would present two measures related to racial justice at Tuesday's board meeting: one is a resolution to support the charges against four officers involved in George Floyd's death, and the other would initiate a review of the county Sheriff's Department's policing policies.

“We want to take this time to review our policing procedures and recruitment and assess how we are doing and identify any opportunities for improvement,” he said. “There’s bad apples in everything that we do.”

But Perez added that he’s “proud” of the Sheriff’s Department’s work.

The board will also discuss a proposal to launch a nonprofit assistance fund to help over 400 organizations impacted by the pandemic at its Tuesday meeting.

In California, the black community has seen the highest number of coronavirus deaths per 100,000 people, followed by the indigenous community — at 16.7% and 10.1%, respectively.

“Not only are we facing racism. But we also need to understand that this epidemic is impacting communities of color most of all, and disproportionately impacting African Americans and the Latino community,” Perez said.

But Riverside County isn’t seeing the same level of COVID-19 disparities as have been reported elsewhere, according to Kim Saruwatari, the county’s public health director.

The Latinx population accounts for 46% of deaths and 45% of the population, whites account for 38% of the population and 37% of deaths, and blacks 6% of the population and just over 8% of deaths. Saruwatari noted that the county’s data is incomplete, with no ethnicity reported in 30% of cases and 3% of deaths.

Saruwatari said officials are also working to improve the health of minority residents beyond the pandemic.

“We at public health have seen the health disparities that have taken the toll on communities of color and show up in higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers and low infant birth weights,” she said. “These are issues created by a system that discriminates against a segment of the population, and it has taken generations to get us to where we are now. This must change.”

As of Friday, nearly 8,800 cases of COVID-19 were reported in the county, resulting in 355 deaths. But officials say more than half of those infected — about 5,150 people — have recovered.

Coronavirus hospitalizations have been fairly steady for the past few weeks, although there was a small jump around Wednesday that officials “will continue to monitor,” Saruwatari said.

“However, even with this jump, we still are well within the state guideline of 5% change between any given days,” she added.

Saruwatari noted that the county’s positivity rate increased to 8% on Wednesday, which she said points to the importance for as many people to get tested as possible “so that we have a better idea of where the virus is in our community, and where the virus is not.”

Although the county rescinded its order requiring face coverings to align with state guidelines, they’re still strongly recommended when out in public, Supervisor Karen Spiegel said.

“We will not be able to continue to move to those next stages and opening additional businesses if we lose control of this virus,” she said.

Also on Friday, the state announced it would [move into Phase 3 of its reopening plan](#). That means gyms, bars, schools can reopen and professional sports can resume with modifications starting next Friday.

Schools and day camps can immediately open statewide. But counties will have to meet certain criteria on the number of cases, testing and preparedness before reopening of the other sectors is approved.

Riverside County got permission to [move into accelerated Phase 2](#) of the governor’s plan late last month. It’s unclear if it will qualify to immediately move into Phase 3. Spiegel said officials are awaiting further state guidance to be able to make that determination.

So far, malls, churches, swap meets, hair salons and dine-in restaurants have been allowed to reopen with modifications in Riverside County.