

**REVISED** September 18, 2023

To: Fairfax County Supervisors—Dan Storck, Rodney Lusk, Walter Alcorn, Dalia Palchik,

From: Ventures in Community, South County Task Force, Fairfax NAACP Housing Committee

RE: Request for a budget consideration in the carryover budget to supplement the fund for rent and utility relief for very low-income families.

Date: September 18, 2023

**The above organizations ask you to submit or co-sponsor a budget consideration for \$2.4 million additional funds to the rent/utility/legal aid relief funds administered by the Department Health and Human Services through nonprofit partners.** This addition will allow for a slower ramp down in assistance than the sharp cutback of nearly half in the current FY2024 budget.

First, we applaud the carryover budget consideration item for **\$8 million for the Preservation of Affordable Housing Fund** by Supervisors Palchik, McKay, Foust, and Alcorn. Those funds are essential to preserving affordable housing as opportunities become available. We also applaud **the request by the Community Services Board** for funds for new treatment programs and a facility in the Route 1 area for youth needing mental health and/or substance abuse care.

**But we think that more immediate funds are needed to keep residents stably housed** as we continue to emerge from the pandemic and the economic effects have a longer recovery time in the lowest income communities. We have spoken with Deputy County Executive Chris Leonard about this request, and he supports it if funds are not diverted from the additional funding requested for the Preservation of Affordable Housing Fund.

**We propose an additional \$2.4 million for rent/utility/legal relief.** Funds can be channeled through nonprofits and faith communities that have been dispersing county funds since the Pandemic. Demand for rent/utility relief has remained high since Spring 2023 but the amount of funds available is diminishing sharply.

During the Pandemic years of 2020-22 we were blessed with **\$77 million** in federal funds for rent relief, plus \$20 million in more flexible CARES funding as well as an eviction moratorium to keep people housed.

As we emerged from the Pandemic in 2023, services providers and the Board agreed that because need was not declining as rapidly as funding, we should find a way to ramp down services with an eye toward the need, which will likely not return to the pre-Covid level of \$4 million due to inflation and rent increases.

In **FY 2023** the Board allocated **\$14 million** in the locally created ERA Bridge Program, using \$10 million in County ARPA funding and \$4 million in county funds.

For **FY 2024** only **\$7.6 million** of rent assistance is included with \$3.6 million in County ARPA funding and \$4 million in county funding.

Of course, we will not return to the Pandemic level of funding, but we continue to urge a ramp down that is matched to need. **Dropping from \$14 million in FY 2023 to \$7.6 million in FY 2024 is too sharp a cut and is not based on a similar decline in need. Funding is dropping by almost half, while service nonprofits report demand has continued at the level of FY2023.**

(We understand that \$7.6 million will be proposed as the new normal baseline for FY2025, but we reserve comment on that figure as we watch the trends in need.)

Right now, we ask you to allocate **another \$2.4 million in FY 2023 carryover funds--either Federal funds or funds set aside by the county before Covid -- to supplement the fund to pay for rent and utilities for a total of \$10 million for FY2024.**

### **Need is still high regionally**

A recent report from the [Capital Area Food Bank](#) notes that while Pandemic supports ended in the spring of 2023, “the number of struggling individuals and families in our region virtually unchanged since last year, [and] the importance of maintaining and, where possible, strengthening remaining support programs has never been higher.”

Following a survey of clients, the Food Bank found that although economics were better overall, **those who reported the highest impacts of inflation on household finances were Black and Hispanic individuals who fell into the 30th income percentile and below, meaning their household income was less than \$77,000.** People in these demographics are recovering more slowly from the pandemic.

The [New York Times](#) recently reported that, “The poverty rate rose to 12.4 percent in 2022 from 7.8 percent in 2021, the largest one-year jump on record, the [Census Bureau said Tuesday](#). Poverty among children more than doubled, to 12.4 percent, from a record low of 5.2 percent the year before.”

### **Local Need**

According to Fairfax County HHS Update monthly reports, the number of calls for assistance with rent, utilities or food did not diminish much between June of 2022 and June of 2023 indicating that the need remains high.

<b>Calls to county help line for assistance for one month, 2021-23</b>				
	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Utilities</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>June 2021</b>	1032	237	173	1442
<b>June 2022</b>	685	208	339	1232
<b>June 2023</b>	621	133	403	1157

Source: HHS Updates for the months cited

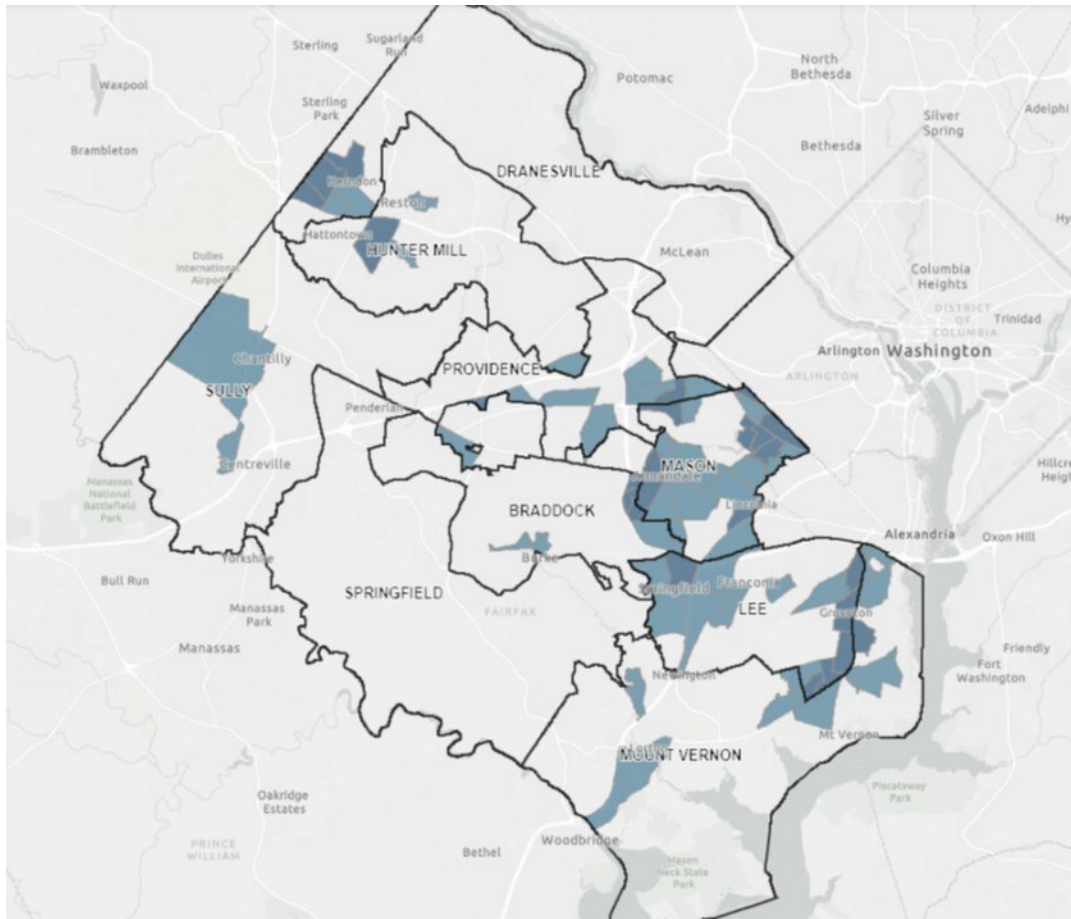
As the table above shows, calls for food assistance have risen in Fairfax and elsewhere and a [Washington Post article](#) last week notes that Fairfax County is one of the areas where hunger levels have remained stagnant since last year.

**Families are likely to first pay their rent and utilities** because of rising rents and diminishing federal resources, according to local faith community representatives who give donations to families. **When they don't have enough money left for food, they turn to food banks.**

Dominion Power recently ended its policy of no shut offs and people are receiving bills with large balances and **facing power cut offs.**

Also, **eviction rates have returned to the pre-covid levels** according to the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance. Evictions have been higher nearly every month of 2023 compared with 2022 (page 3 of the [Eviction Dashboard](#)). From January 1 to July 31, 1,742 writs of eviction were issued. Regions with the highest **actual evictions** by the Sherriff were Alexandria (Mt. Vernon and Franconia-- 563), Fairfax (231), Falls Church (189). Herndon (173), and Reston (121). These areas correspond to the County's "pockets of poverty." The Eviction Lab estimates that the number of informal evictions (self-eviction after receiving an eviction threat from a landlord) can be ten times higher than actual evictions.

The areas shaded in blue in the map below show the areas of the County that have been defined as those **disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic**. The shaded areas account for approximately **28 percent of the County's population**. These areas are still recovering. We hope that supervisors representing these areas will support our request for additional funds to address the changing need of residents.



We understand that funds can be found in at least two sources:

- \$12.04 million from the Reserve for the Coronavirus Pandemic, now available to be spent.
- \$2.24 million available from general fund carryover for supervisors' projects.

**Please let us know if you are willing to support or co-sponsor a budget consideration to request additional funds for rent/utility relief for residents who qualify for it.**

To discuss this proposal, please contact Mary Paden 703-298-2176 or mary.paden@gmail.com

## **Two other matters**

**We also want to raise concern about the needs of people experiencing homelessness.**

Currently there is a **two-month wait period for a bed for an individual in an "emergency shelter,"** according to FACETS and direct reports. Anyone who calls 703-222-0880 and qualifies for help should be able to get emergency shelter the same or next day.

Funds should be available for elderly or infirm people who are homeless for temporary shelter in motels especially during bad weather. A recent NAACP survey of 63 people who are currently unsheltered found that nearly 20% considered their health to be poor or below average and 30% are over age 65. They may need more than a spot on the floor of a homeless shelter during heat emergency nights. **We suggest adding sufficient funds to ensure that people who are homeless, especially those who are infirm, can be sheltered in motels or alternate county facilities with beds.** Health and Human Services Director Chris Leonard tells us that he has sufficient funds to do this now but that the matter should be reviewed at future carryover sessions. Meanwhile, we hope the wait times can be monitored and eliminated.

## **Increase work program for homeless people.**

Increase the capacity of the [Operation Stream Shield project](#), which employs homeless residents to pick up litter and pull invasive species for an hourly rate. This is a popular program that could be enlarged that offers homeless people a chance to earn some money for transportation and other needs. It will not lift them out of homelessness but is an excellent alternative to panhandling.

Chris Herrington, Public Works Director, who runs the project, said it is currently funded. But we suggest it **be expanded**, especially the invasives removal component, perhaps in conjunction with the Park Authority. We also suggest that the **hourly wage of \$13 be raised to be comparable with entry wage for county employees.**

