



February 5th, 2021

Dear Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan and Commissioner Jennifer Ho,

Equity in Place (EIP) is a diverse group of strategic partners from organizations led by people of color and housing advocacy organizations in the Twin Cities that believe everyone deserves access to opportunity wherever they want to live. Our work is rooted in an understanding of the legacy and ongoing impact of structural racism on development and growth — and underscores and amplifies how it has impacted our communities' access to housing, property ownership, and wealth building opportunities. We believe the only way to address our deep racial inequities in housing is by bringing the expertise of impacted communities into decision making processes in meaningful and powerful ways, especially when large public investments can either perpetuate or disrupt historic patterns of harm to communities of color.

As you know, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and the ensuing economic and housing crises. And, like so many times before, government systems have failed to adequately serve or create access to public resources for our communities, leaving community-based organizations to pick up the pieces and respond to urgent needs, without additional compensation.

We can see this dynamic clearly in the process, implementation and distribution of funds through the COVID Housing Assistance Program (CHAP). Because our communities have endured an epidemic of housing injustice for decades, many of our EIP members work diligently to support renters navigating a sometimes confusing and non intuitive process to access resources, like CHAP. Over the course of the pandemic, New American Development Center (NADC) have been CHAP administrators themselves, while Housing Justice Center (HJC), Hope Community, and Urban Homeworks have also been actively supporting tenants in filling out applications for assistance. African Career Education and Resource, Inc. (ACER) also provided technical assistance to Hennepin County for its emergency rental assistance program.

Based on that direct knowledge and engagement with the program, **we expect that the significant concerns and challenges we outline below will be proactively addressed** in the distribution of additional federal stimulus funding and integrated into any current or future housing assistance models.

Failing to adjust these measures will have major racial justice impacts on our communities and our organizations.

Awareness of Programs and Resources

- ***ISSUE: People didn't know the program exists until close to the deadline***
 - The program didn't do enough to prioritize organizations with established relationships, trust, and know-how in communicating to their communities
 - Marketing efforts did not reach deep enough into impacted communities
 - Many people were not aware that resources were available to help support them in paying rent
 - The program presumed that people have internet access, when this is not always the case
 - ***SOLUTION: Create a system of application and tracking that is not reliant on people having internet access and being able to read English. Resource community organizations and create many public touch points of outreach into impacted communities and people.***

Application Process

- ***ISSUE: Information that tenants shared wasn't trusted***
 - Tenants were forced to provide challenging and complex documentation and prove that the information they provided was, in fact, true
 - Tenants were further traumatized with a time consuming and onerous process
 - Organizations and agencies who were attempting to support tenants were unnecessarily overtaxed
 - Landlords were not asked similar questions or asked for corroborating documentation
 - ***SOLUTION: Information requested in tenant applications should be less detailed and shouldn't require additional proof (should be self-certified)***

- ***ISSUE: Requiring that tenants state that they have been impacted by COVID is confusing and time consuming***
 - The impact of COVID is well documented, especially on communities of color and lower wealth communities
 - Tenants were often unclear how to answer this question. For instance, if someone had lost their job, or had hours reduced, they didn't necessarily know if it was directly due to COVID or not
 - The uncertainty of the question has impacted on people who have experience with public assistance programs who know that punitive measures are often the consequence of incorrectly answering questions on application forms
 - ***SOLUTION - Remove this question and trust that people who are applying have been impacted by COVID (economically, health wise, etc.)***

Staffing and Communications

- **ISSUE:** *The application process was lengthy, complicated and limited communication back to applicants*
 - Many tenants who applied did not hear back from agencies to know if their application was received, the status of their application, and if/when it had been declined or approved
 - **SOLUTION:** *Create a helpline with sufficient staffing and staff with great patience so people receive a reply and guidance in their application*

- **ISSUE:** *County and state staff and administrator were not adequately responsive*
 - There was no technical assistance and, because of understaffing, administrators were not following up with tenants after they applied
 - **SOLUTION:** *Set clear expectations to staff about the need to communicate with tenants about their applications*

- **ISSUE:** *Many community and advocacy organizations were not given adequate resources for the level of support necessary to provide support to community members in the application process*
 - Community and advocacy organizations had to use their own resources to fill accessibility gaps
 - Organizations were once again put into a position that is not a sustainable, much less equitable, solution to building a system of support for tenants to get needed assistance
 - **SOLUTION:** *Recognize the expertise, amount of work, and level of resources that community organizations need to support tenants in applying for rental assistance*

Rollout of Resources

- **ISSUE:** *Checks are too slow in reaching tenants while they are being harassed by landlords for their rent payments*
 - The administrative process has been slow to get checks to tenants
 - In contrast, the court process moves quickly in evicting tenants — an issue that will become more relevant once the eviction moratorium ends
 - The current process fails to recognize that the legal process for eviction happens far faster than the resolution of an application for rental assistance
 - **SOLUTION -** *Identify a process to more quickly get checks cut and into tenants' hands and advocate for slowing down the eviction process in the courts*

Effective, rapid and equitable distribution of emergency housing assistance — and adequate support for and partnership from community-based organizations — is a matter of life and death in our communities. Given our good-faith engagement with Minnesota Housing over the past several years, we know these concepts and priorities related to housing equity are not new. We request a written response to the concerns outlined above from MHFA and the Walz administration. We appreciate your prompt attention and look forward to continued engagement on these critical issues.

Equity in Place

African Career, Education, and Resources, Inc. / Alliance for Metropolitan Stability / American Indian Family Center / Community Stabilization Project / Center for Urban and Regional Affairs / Frogtown Neighborhood Association / HOME Line / Hope Community / Housing Justice Center / Inquilinxs Unidxs Por Justicia / Jewish Community Action / Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers / Minnesotans Standing Together to End Poverty and Homelessness / Native American Community Development Institute / New American Development Center / Powderhorn Park Neighborhood Association / Pueblos de Lucha y Esperanza / Southeast Community Organization / Urban Homeworks / West Side Community Organization