

Emergency Rental Assistance Outreach: Evaluating strategies to reach and support vulnerable tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic in California

Deshonay Dozier, Katharine Nelson, Anna Duan, Isabel Harner

Executive Summary

Over the last two years, the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) contracted the Local Initiatives Support Cooperation (LISC) to coordinate a statewide network of more than 130 nonprofits to promote and conduct outreach about largescale emergency rent relief funding available to low-income tenants through California's COVID-19 Rent Relief Program. Most of these organizations also supported tenants applying for emergency rental assistance. In this report, we provide an overview of the network and the organizations that participated in it, and present findings from a detailed survey of the organizations that were a part of the Local Partner Network (LPN). The survey focused on groups' perceived effectiveness, their experience with the application process, and their perceptions of various aspects of the rollout of the state program including the application software, the call center, marketing strategies, and the use of data to target outreach.

This report is part of a broader evaluation by the Housing Initiative at Penn of the effectiveness of the California COVID-19 Rent Relief Program, Housing is Key. Rent relief programs were launched across the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic and as programs were developed and rolled out rapidly in response to the crisis, community-based organizations were often central in supporting and sometimes managing those programs. Our findings about the nonprofit network in California underscore the important role these organizations play in improving the accessibility and equity of emergency programs. They also speak to the enormity of the logistical challenges involved in coordinating a massive network of groups to support the largest emergency rental assistance program in the country. On a more practical level, our findings offer key insights about various aspects of the operation of the program from a group of stakeholders intimately connected to the operation of the program, which may be useful for the design of future programs on the central importance of in-person and phone outreach and support, radio and social media toolkits, the use of quantitative data in informing outreach, and the challenges of working with landlords.

Main Findings

- **Member organizations report that their efforts were effective and that they increased the participation of low-income and underserved tenants in rent relief programs.** Most organizations surveyed (80%) reported their outreach strategies were very effective or moderately effective. More than 40% of surveyed organizations indicated their efforts significantly increased tenant participation in rent relief.
- **Conducting outreach and tenant support during the pandemic required virtual outreach and activities. Yet by the end of 2021, when the survey was conducted, more than half (53%) indicated they conducted in-person or physical outreach at least twice a week.** Almost all groups (93%) relied on social media strategies, but 60% did canvassing work. Groups also relied on partnerships with churches, community organizations and other groups to make announcements and spread awareness of the program (60%). Thirty-eight groups indicated these collaborations with local organizations very likely contributed to greater tenant application completion rates.
- **Most organizations (70%) described the application process for rent relief as moderately or very difficult for tenants, but most (60%) reported that they were moderately or very satisfied with changes made to the application during the Summer of 2021.** Organizations reported that the application took too long. However, organization reported that what went well with the applications were that undocumented people had the ability receive access to rental assistance.
- **Surveys indicate that most tenants were very willing to accept support from LPN member organizations with their applications, but most landlords were only moderately willing to support the tenants' applications.** Organizations described some landlords being frustrated with the ERAP program/process, and others not trusting government programs or large nonprofit organizations. Respondents emphasized direct communication and outreach to landlords can improve their willingness to participate, and consistently reported the importance of moderating or facilitating communication between tenant and landlord.
- **Organizations were generally positive about the written and social media marketing materials, but the responses were more mixed about radio advertisements.** Most groups indicated that the language in the materials was accessible, and translations were sufficient, but there were some concerns about coordination, the targeting of local radio advertisements, and about materials keeping up with changes in the program in real time.
- **Some groups made good use of regularly updated data on eviction risk and application counts to support their local efforts, but others did not use the data or were unsure of how to access it.** Half of organizations reported that UrbanFootprint data, a big-data firm providing eviction risk data, was moderately or very helpful in supporting outreach efforts. The other half reported the eviction risk data it was neither helpful nor harmful. Many of these groups wrote in that they had not used the data or were unsure how to access it, suggesting some need for additional training or support.
- **Almost half (48%) of all groups stated they were very satisfied with the Local Partner Network, and a third (32%) stated they were moderately satisfied.** Most respondents were especially positive about weekly partner meetings. Roughly half of LPN members stated that their concerns were significantly addressed throughout the program. Our results suggest that the LPN weekly meetings, where organizations voiced their concerns along with other avenues outside of the LPN, were particularly effective in the overall LPN structure.

Introduction

The State of California received more than \$4 billion in rental assistance funds allocated through the Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). More than 550,000 applications were submitted for rent relief through the state's portal, and more than 350,000 California renters have received ERAP funding so far.¹ This makes California's COVID-19 Rent Relief Program the largest ERAP in the country.

The California ERAP program implemented a strategy to increase access to rent relief among historically marginalized communities by employing local organizations to help provide information, application assistance, and spread the word about the rent relief program. This report details who those organizations are, what role they served in support of increasing access to rent relief, their experience with working with tenants, landlords, and the general ERAP program and their perception of the effectiveness of outreach strategies.

The Housing Initiative at Penn (HIP) collaborated with the State of California and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to evaluate how outreach strategies to reach under-served renters in California helped gain greater access to rental assistance. LISC is a national non-profit organization that serves as an intermediary organization that receives private, foundation, and governmental funding to administer programs. LISC administered a Local Partner Network of 100+ nonprofit and community-based organizations throughout California to provide local, on-the-ground and in-language support to help clients who applied to the CA COVID-19 Rent Relief Program. HIP conducted an independent evaluation of outreach

¹ The count of applications comes from HCD's application database, which is shared with HIP through a formal data agreement. The number of approved applications and complete applications is reported weekly on the state's data dashboard which can be accessed here: https://housing.ca.gov/covid_rr/dashboard.html. The count of applications reported here is larger than the figure reported on the dashboard because the dashboard figure reports 'complete applications'.

strategies and was funded by private foundations. HIP did not receive financial support from the state of California or LISC. In this report, we provide a program overview of the Local Partner Network, a snapshot of the Local Partner Network, a description of our collaborative evaluation survey, and a detailed description of our survey findings.

Program Overview

California Senate Bill 91 was passed into law at the end of January 2021, establishing the state's ERAP Program to directly administer rent relief to low-income tenants facing hardship due to COVID-19. California's program launched six weeks later, when the California COVID-19 Rent Relief Program portal began to accept online applications in March 2021.

HCD created a two-tier approach to targeting marginalized communities through outreach strategies. First, the State selected Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to bring together on-the-ground partnerships in communities and tribal areas across California to assist in implementing ERAP. LISC supported the selection, administration, and management of 100+ organizations to participate in the CA ERAP Local Partner Network. Second, HCD contracted UrbanFootprint, a big data consulting group. UrbanFootprint identified where and to what extent applications were being submitted in geographical areas across California alongside estimated eviction risk data that helped to show need for rent relief. UrbanFootprint helped identify high-risk areas with fewer applications at the census tract level so that LISC could find organizations to conduct outreach in these areas. The Local Partner Network identified prospective organizations to fill gaps by providing outreach in hard-to-reach neighborhoods and geographic areas and could hit the ground running given their financial standing and ability to start outreach quickly.

At HIP, we set out to evaluate the Local Partner Network by first grasping the overall program. LPN

organizations were required to report their weekly outreach strategies. These forms of internal evaluation were paired with opportunities for LPN organizations to provide feedback and receive updates about ERAP and the Local Partner Network through weekly meetings with the entire LPN organizational membership and LISC. LISC also provided one on one office hours with LPN officers in order to support organizations to best conduct their outreach strategies. Across these avenues, LPN members shared strategies, challenges, and local and state-wide policy changes such as the impact of rent moratoriums and improvements to the state’s emergency rental assistance program applications for tenants and landlords. Initially at the start of the LPN, LISC sought to understand barriers to outreach through focus groups on Latinx communities, Chinese speaking communities, and rural areas as these were populations that were under-served at the start of the California Rent Relief program. HIP utilized the focus groups, internal weekly reporting, and attended the LPN weekly meetings to gain a snapshot of the network to support our survey development.

Snapshot: LPN Organizations and Activities

The number of organizations active in the Local Partner Network (LPN) fluctuated over the course of the emergency rental assistance program, but at its peak roughly 140 organizations were active throughout California counties. The network expanded over time to include additional outreach and support activities in areas with fewer applications and larger populations of low-income renters at greater risk of eviction. By the end of 2021 there were twice as many LPN-member organizations compared to when the program launched earlier that year in March.

Most partner organizations provide services to vulnerable populations, and some describe themselves as advocacy or grassroots organizations. Based on our survey, most LPN groups (N=72) reported that they provide services to vulnerable populations, including food distribution and food assistance, tenants’ rights

trainings, and legal support. All LPN member groups offer assistance in more than one language. Spanish is the most common non-English language, and is offered at 85% of member organizations. Other common languages offered by partners include Tagalog (19 groups), Cantonese (17 groups), Mandarin (16 groups), and Vietnamese (11 groups).²

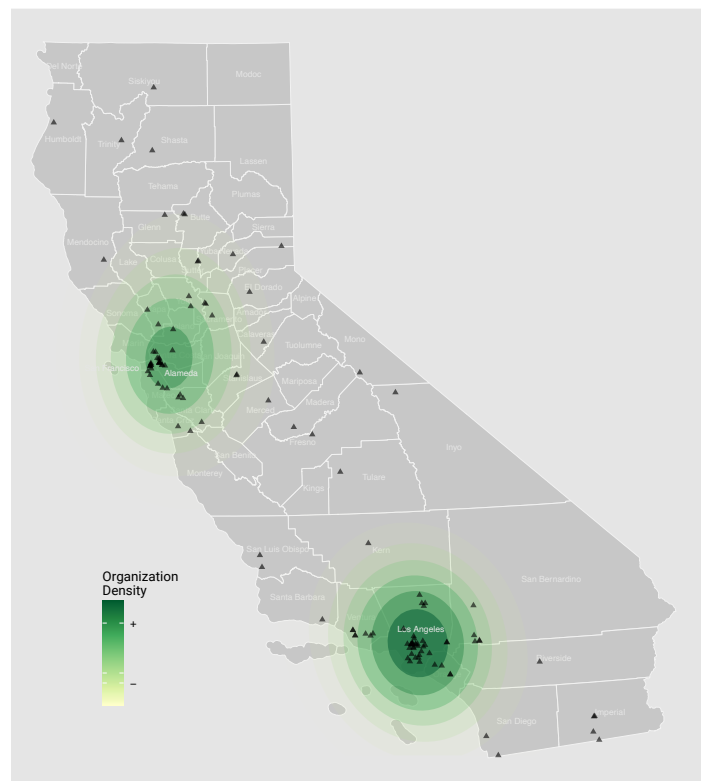


CHART 1 Density Map of LPN Organizations Across California

This map shows the locations of LPN member organizations and the density of members (organizations per square mile) as of November 2021.

Every county in California is served by at least one LPN member organization, but the member organizations are clustered within the Los Angeles and Bay areas. The City of Los Angeles alone is home to 36 LPN member groups. This concentration is appropriate and intentional because Los Angeles, like other large urban areas, is home to so many tenants at-risk of eviction. **CHART 1** is a density map of LPN member

² These counts of languages offered by groups are taken from a list of partner organizations as of November 2021 when there were 138 active organizations. Our survey of groups was conducted around the same time October-December 2021, so captures roughly the same collection of organizations.

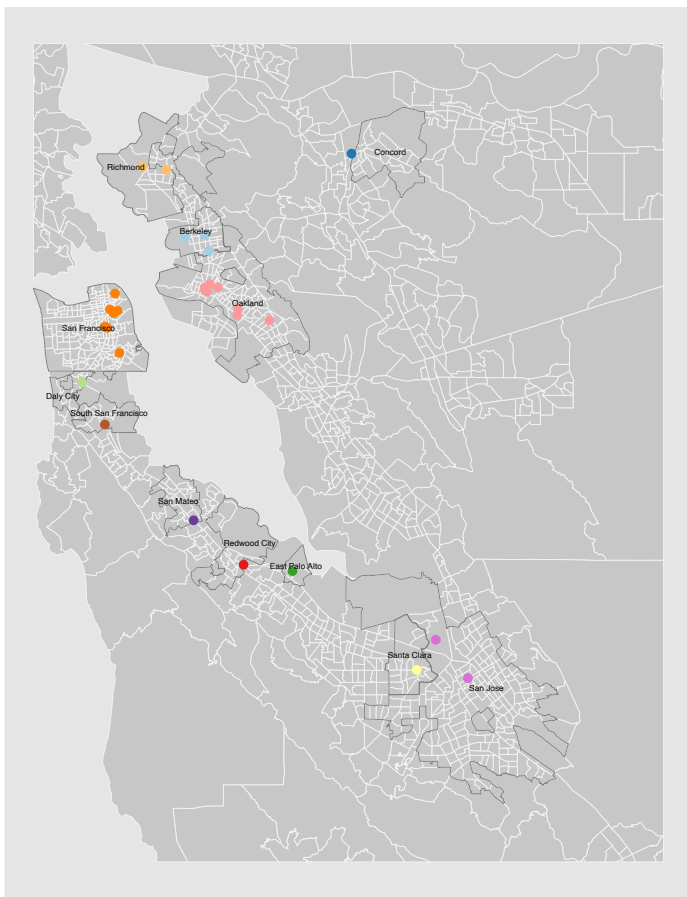


CHART 2 LPN Organizations Located in the Bay Area

This map visualizes the locations of LPN partners in the Bay Area. 32 total partner organizations are spread between numerous cities along the bay, with the most partners in San Francisco and Oakland.

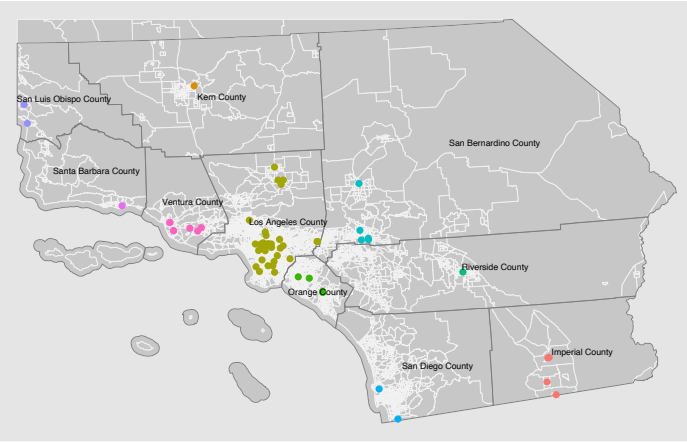


CHART 3 LPN Organizations Located in Southern California

This map shows the LPN partners in the Los Angeles and Southern California region. The majority of organizations are clustered in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, although each organization serves residents from several adjacent counties.

organizations and shows the concentration visually, with the clustering of LPN organizations in the large urban metropolitan areas. The actual locations of individual organizations are displayed in black and are spread across most counties. However, organizations located in rural areas conducted outreach at a greater distance, whereas more urban areas focused outreach and support within their location areas.

In the Bay area, there were partners located in many municipalities, as shown the map in **CHART 2**. In Southern California, **CHART 3**, there were partner organizations based in every county, but partners were most numerous in the populous Los Angeles, Ventura and Orange Counties.

Within the LPN, organizations are classified into tiers based on their primary function: Tier 1. Outreach, Tier 2. Promotion, Tier 3. Rent relief application assistance virtually and door-to-door, Tier 4. Pop-ups, Tier 5. Door knocking. “Pop ups” are temporary application sites, generally with wireless internet available for in-person web-based applications, where residents and landlords could complete and submit applications for emergency rental assistance. Within the Local Partner Network, most organizations were designated Tier 3 (95), followed by Tier 1 (82) and Tier 2 (77). A much smaller number of organizations are classified as Tier 4 (11) and Tier 5 (3). Most organizations are classified within more than one tier and nearly half of LPN partners performed Tier 1, 2, and 3 functions.

The most popular activities reported by LPN member groups were appointments (116 organizations), flyers (93 organizations), emailing (91 organizations), social media including Instagram (82 organizations) and Twitter (67 organizations), and hosting webinars (28 organizations). The organizations who focused on rent relief application assistance (Tier 3) were more likely than others to host webinars, hold appointments, and do door-to-door support than organizations focused primarily on outreach and promotion.

LPN activity generally followed the concentration of the organizations themselves, with more appointments

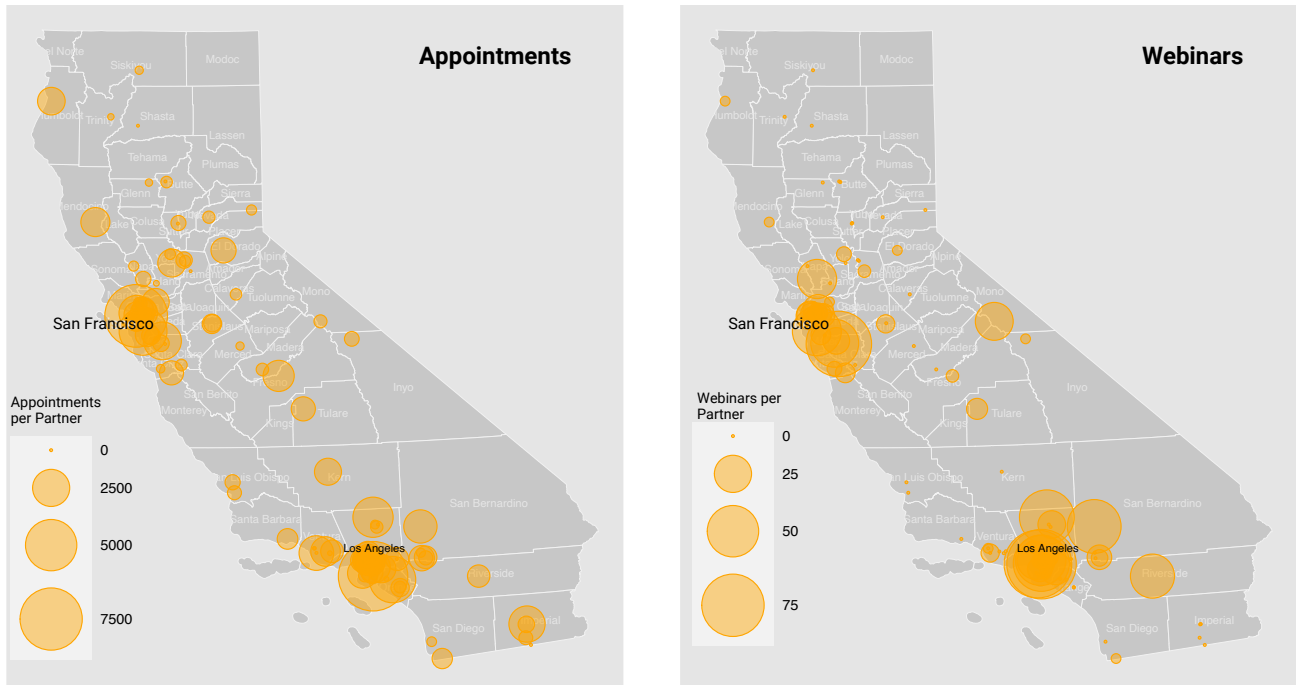


CHART 4 LPN Appointments and Webinars Activity Map

This map shows the spatial patterns of appointment and webinar activities across the Local Partner Network throughout ERAP. Los Angeles and Bay Area regions have the highest overall activity volume. Appointments were less concentrated in urban areas than webinar activities.

and webinars in largest urban metropolitan areas in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, as shown in **CHART 4**. However, hosting webinars was more geographically concentrated in these largest urban centers compared to the number of appointments. Appointments were relatively more common in less dense and rural locations.

In **CHART 5** we overlay the number of active LPN partner organizations each week (lighter blue) with the number of appointments held each week (darker blue) over the course of California’s ERAP. For the first months of the program, the number of partners and the number of appointments held each week grows at a similar rate. There are more partners than appointments because many partners are engaging in promotion and outreach activities only. This changes at the end of the Summer 2021, as trends reflect a sharp increase in the number of weekly appointments held by member groups. This surge in new appointments seems to be driven by two primary factors. First, the City of Los Angeles entered the state program on September 1,

2021. The city ran its own local program for several months before joining the state program, which drove lots of new applications. Second, the Supreme Court overruled the CDC’s federal moratorium on evictions on August 26, 2021. This brought significant media attention to these issues and a new consciousness among partners and the public about the importance of the state’s eviction protections. California’s state moratorium on evictions for nonpayment ended on September 30, 2021. However, starting October 1, 2021, most low- and moderate-income renters continued to be protected from eviction if they had an active rent relief application. This prompted a surge of new appointments and new applications for emergency rental assistance.

The number of active partners remained high through most of the fourth quarter of 2021 whereas the number of appointments during this final quarter fluctuates somewhat. Then, in December 2021, there is a significant drop both in active partners and in appointments. During this period, the state

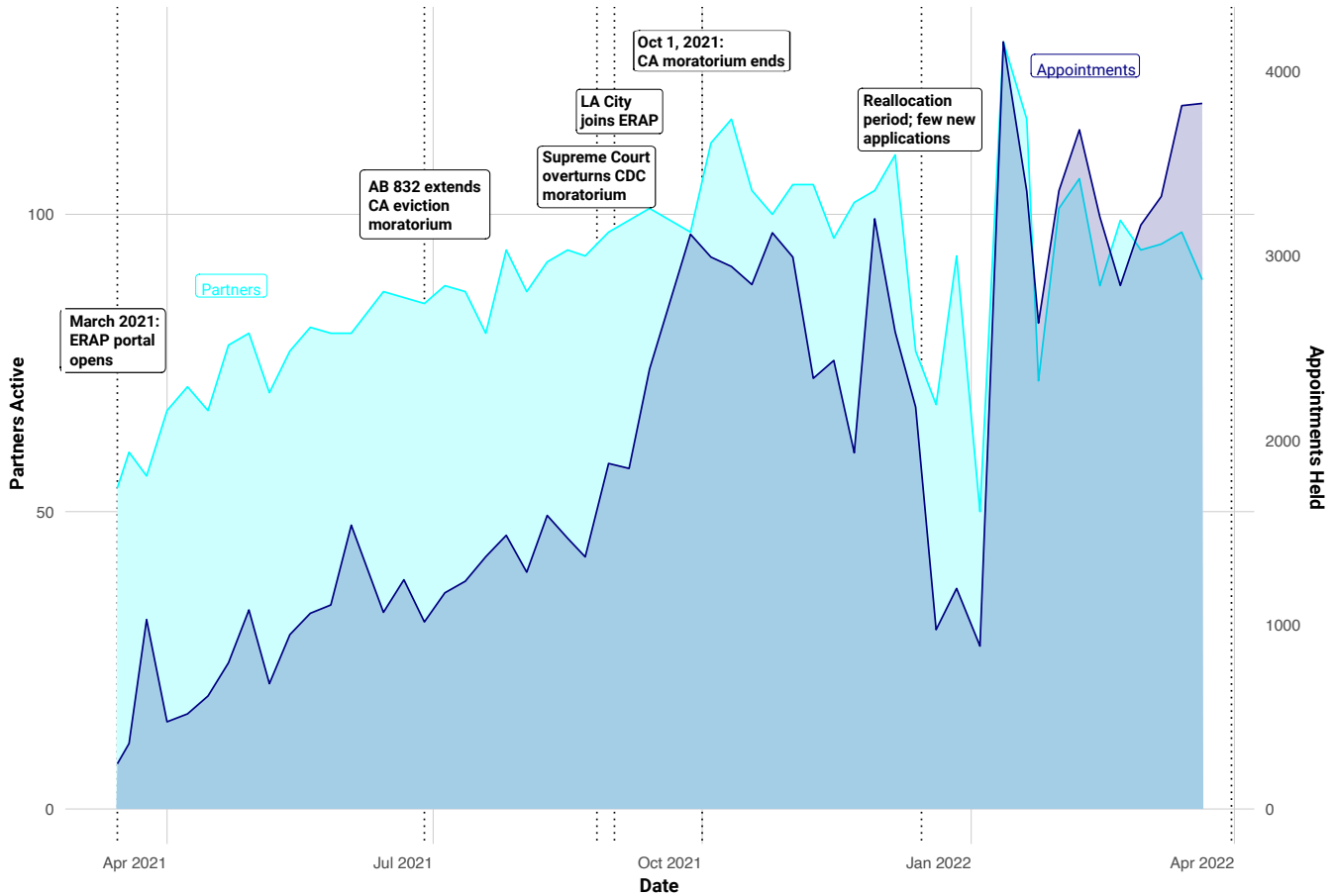


CHART 5 LPN Active Organizations and Appointments through Program

The number of active LPN partners (light blue) increased steadily throughout 2021, and rebounded in 2022 after a lull at the end of the year. The number of weekly appointments (dark blue) follows a similar pattern, but with much larger spikes in activity in early Fall 2021 and in the last months of the program in 2022.

program was awaiting additional funding through the Department of Treasury’s reallocation process resulting in a significant decline in active LPN member organizations. There were very few new applications for rental assistance being submitted and the state program was working through existing ones, prioritizing very low-income tenants. Based on our conversations with LISC and partner organizations, the active partners during this period spent more of their time supporting existing applications as opposed to outreach and support of new applicants.

After this lull, we see a rebound in LPN activity for the final four months that California’s ERAP program. There were as many active partners during these final months in the first quarter of 2022 as at the peak in

2021 as organizations began hosting more in-person appointments and pop-ups than at any other time in the program. This increase in appointments suggests the network was able to actively support more individual applicants than at any time previously, with a final push to support tenants getting one-time rental assistance before the portal closed and shut out of this unique pandemic program.

This report now turns to the results of our survey of LPN member organizations, conducted between October and December 2021, just before the lull and final push before the closing of the portal.

Survey Approach: Collaborative Evaluation

HIP's approach to evaluating LPN activity involved analyzing focus groups of member organizations conducted by LISC, weekly activity data reported by organizations, and weekly meetings. HIP used these as a starting point to develop a survey of all LPN member organizations focused on outreach effectiveness. The survey evaluates outreach effectiveness in the Local Partner Network across the following areas: organizational perception of outreach effectiveness; organizational perception of the application process for rental assistance; organizational perception of tenant and landlord relations in completing the rental assistance application; organizational perception of the effectiveness of the Local Partner Network program; organizational perception of marketing effectiveness. Out of 137 organizations who part of the LPN, 122 completed our survey. These 122 organizations self-selected to participate in the survey after announcements at LPN weekly meetings and email blasts in which HIP provided the survey link and details about the objectives of the study.

This approach to the evaluation enabled us to design a survey carefully tailored to the specifics of the LPN program, which captures feedback on specific program elements including marketing, the call-center, and the granular data that was provided to groups, among other things. However, there are several limitations to this approach. First, our survey was conducted at a single point in October/December 2021. This means the survey was only distributed to organizations active in the LPN during this time; we are missing the perspective of any organizations that were active early in the rollout of the state's rent relief program and dropped out of the network, as well as any organizations that joined afterwards. Second, organizations self-selected to participate in our evaluation survey leaving us with an incomplete picture of perceived effectiveness. A related challenge is the drop-off rates for answering questions in latter half of the survey. Many of the questions about the

perceived effectiveness of the LPN itself were placed near the end of the survey, leaving a lower response rate for feedback about LPN effectiveness.

The final limitation to our evaluation is that we sent out two similar yet slightly different versions of the survey to organizations, one in October 2021 and the second in December 2021. The first version of the survey was produced independently by HIP using our results from focus groups, weekly reporting data, observation of weekly organization meetings, and based on conversations with LISC. There were 23 responses to this version of the survey. The second survey incorporated edits and additional questions based on feedback from LISC. The amended survey added sections related to marketing and to each organization's experience in the Local Partner Network. It was sent out in December 2021 and received a total of 99 responses.

Wherever possible, our evaluation incorporates the answers from both versions of the survey. Throughout our discussion below we refer to two sets of data: 1) data across the two surveys (N = 122) and 2) data from the amended survey (N=99). The primary topic areas only covered by the amended survey relate to marketing and organizational experience in the Local Partner Network.

Perceived Effectiveness of Outreach Strategies

LPN member organizations reported their efforts were a critical component to the sustained practices of the LPN over time. Furthermore, statewide and local stay-at-home orders and social distancing mandates informed the type of outreach that the Tier 1, 2, and 3 organizations could conduct as directed by LISC. This means that outreach was at times limited to virtual approaches and/or approaches involving social distancing. In July 2021, the LPN expanded to in-person approaches to outreach as a result of mandates lifting across California and locally. Nonetheless, almost all groups surveyed stated that they used social media (93%) as an outreach strategy but most also engaged in in-person outreach such as canvassing (57%). On

our open-ended responses, one organization stated that they had to create a social media account (e.g. Facebook) for the first time to conduct ERAP outreach while another stated that they already had an active following. In addition, some organizations expressed not being able to do in person outreach and coming up with different strategies to meet social distancing mandates.

One-on-one support of tenants also occurred both in-person and virtually. This one-on-one support included community office hours (29 groups), rental relief application clinics (24 groups), virtual webinars and/or zoom clinics (22 groups), and providing access to computers/tablets (24 groups). Some groups engaged primarily with tenants over the phone; while others describe in-person office hours, such as at outdoor events. More than half (53%) of all organizations reported conducting in-person outreach at least twice per week. This included promoting the program at churches, housing fairs, clinics, schools, and health fairs as well as canvassing at swap meets, laundromats, food distribution sites, and door-to-door. At the time of the survey, only 11 groups surveyed reported doing pop-ups (Tier 4), and 3 groups reported doing door-knocking (Tier 5). While fewer in number, Tier 4 and Tier 5 organizations likely reached significant numbers of renters. Other popular outreach approaches included partnership with non-LPN organizations to promote ERAP at organizational membership or neighborhood meetings, either in person or virtually.

Given these outreach strategies more than 80% of groups reported that their outreach strategies were moderately or very effective, and 86% felt they had moderately or significantly increased tenant participation in the program. Four-out-of-ten (43%) of groups felt they had significantly increased tenant participation in the rent relief programs, while only 13% felt that their efforts had no effect or only slightly boosted tenant participation. Groups pointed to the importance of partnering with other organizations for success: 60% of respondents reported that partnering with local groups and neighborhood institutions (such as churches and schools) increased their

effectiveness. There were 38 groups who reported these collaborations very likely contributed to tenant application completion rates.

One unique aspect of the LPN approach was to incorporate regular up-to-date local data on estimated households at risk of eviction alongside counts of applications submitted to the rental assistance program. As described earlier in the report, consultant UrbanFootprint provided regular data updates of eviction risk and number of applications at the county and sub-county level. In addition to LISC using these data to expand the network to areas of need, these data were made available to partner organizations to help them with outreach and support efforts. Our surveys show that some groups took advantage of this data and found it very useful, whereas many others did not avail themselves of it or did not know how to access it. Out of sample of 43 groups responding to these questions (which were later in the survey), 21 partners reported they were moderately or very helpful and 19 partners reported they were neither helpful nor unhelpful. Those organizations that reported the data was useful indicated that it helped track efforts and/or progress, gave them an idea of how many applications were coming in from places, and helped them target their efforts. Many organizations that reported the data was neither helpful nor unhelpful commented that they had not used the data and/or that they were unsure how to access it outside of the regular meetings with LISC. Several of these organizations wrote in an open-response questions that they would prefer to have data at a smaller neighborhood or zip code scale. These groups should have had access to this more granular data, which suggests there may have been some confusion about what the data included or how to access it.

Challenges and Improvements in Applying for Rent Relief

A core element of outreach for LPN organizations is to promote ERAP to tenants and subsequently to support applications. Yet, the application process and the application itself was a point of concern

for organizations, particularly early on in their participation in the LPN. 70% of survey respondents described the rent relief application as moderately difficult or very difficult for tenants. The most common barriers identified were the amount of time it took (58%), difficulty navigating the application website (38%), and unnecessary information requested in the application (26%). Organizations also felt that the non-English language applications were not accessible or understandable (26%). Beyond the initial application, respondents identified problems with the application process more generally. The most common responses pointed to challenges in learning the status of an application once it was submitted, and/or how long it took to receive the actual funds.

In part as a result of feedback from LPN organizations, HCD made several changes to the application. In particular, LISC conducted three focus groups with LPN member organizations that independently support Chinese speaking residents, Spanish speaking residents, and residents in rural areas. Our survey indicates that more than 60% of LPN organizations were moderately satisfied or very satisfied with the changes that were made to the rent relief application during Summer 2021. Two-thirds of respondents reported that the application takes less time to complete than before, and more than half (53%) report that the amount of information requested by the program has been reduced. In addition, roughly two-thirds (66%) reported that one thing going well in the application is the ability for undocumented people to apply.

Survey responses on the application website, which used Neighborly Software, were generally positive but respondents reported it was difficult to navigate and they reported several challenges. The survey sample was smaller for this set of questions (N=43). Roughly one-quarter indicated that the Neighborly Software was very helpful; half indicated it was moderately helpful; and 10% indicated it was moderately or very unhelpful. Organizations stated several specific barriers to the application. This included that the application portal had technical glitches, some of the language of the application was too formal, the

use of an email address to access and/or submit the application was a barrier, or that applicants could not use the portal to know the status of their application or what may have been needed to complete. Beyond the application portal itself, many organizations shared concerns about how applications are handled once they are submitted. Organizations report that the review process by case managers took too long, documents were requested multiple times of applicants, and that there was no easy way to update the application or make changes in response to case managers' requests.

LPN organizations referred applicants to the Horne Call Center, a company contracted by the HCD to support tenants and landlords in completing applications. LPN organizations did not work through Horne but understanding their perception of Horne's effectiveness is important because of organizations' direct involvement with applicants and their applications. The survey sample on these questions was also small (N=43) because the questions were close to the end of the survey, but perceptions were split about their interactions with Horne's Call Center.

Roughly half of organizations found the Horne Call Center to be either moderately unhelpful or very unhelpful (47%). Another 38% found that the Horne Call Center was moderately helpful or very helpful. The remaining 15% reported it was neither helpful nor unhelpful. Across respondents, some organizations felt that the Horne Center was easy for applicants to call (27%) while others felt that it was not easy (22%). Some organizations felt that call center employees were helpful (21%) while others felt that employees were not responsive to applicants follow up needs (22%). Many organizations reported that the language was accessible for applicants (30%). Some organizations expressed that extending call center hours and reducing wait times would improve its effectiveness. Others expressed that having caseworkers provide consistent information and follow up with applicants would best improve the Horne Call Center's effectiveness.

Overall, LPN organizations report that their promotion of ERAP and assistance with applications, as well

as their feedback to LISC and HCD, helped bring about changes to the application that better served applicants. However, the application, the application processing through the portal and related systems, and the external support for applicants through the Call Center could have been improved to better serve applicants and make rental assistance more accessible.

Landlords and Tenants

A significant element of the application for rent relief was the participation of both the tenant and the landlord. Organizations expressed concerns regarding landlord and tenant relations in LPN weekly meetings, noticing these dynamics could create barriers in applying for ERAP. Our survey asked about the willingness of tenants to receive support completing applications, and about the willingness of landlords to support tenant rental applications. Most survey respondents indicated that tenants were very willing to receive support on their applications (64% of groups, N=67), but that landlords were most often only moderately willing to support tenants' rent relief applications (58% of groups). There were also some groups (15%) that indicated landlords were moderately unwilling to support the tenants' applications.

The open response answers regarding working with landlords described challenges with landlord distrust of government programs and frustration with the program/process. Others described tenants being fearful of asking landlords for information and/or documentation for the application. Several organizations described the need for clear and consistent information sharing with landlords, and the importance of moderating meetings and communication between landlords and tenants through the application process. Not all organizations interacted much with landlords, but 19 groups reported doing presentations to landlords about the rent relief programs.

Some of these dynamics between tenants and landlords changed with the introduction of Assembly Bill 832 in June 2021, which legislated direct-to-tenant payments in cases where landlords refused to or failed to complete

the application. An upcoming HIP report examines the importance of this and other recent legislative changes in helping tenants access rental assistance, especially those living in more informal housing arrangements.

Marketing

A major part of outreach strategies through LISC involved working with a marketing firm, Proσιο Communications, who developed the marketing tools, including written materials, social media and advertisements. We evaluated how LPN organizational members perceived the effectiveness of marketing strategies and the results were mixed. Like the feedback on the Call Center, these questions were at the end of the survey resulting in fewer responses (N=43). Most groups (65%) indicated the marketing materials were moderately or very effective; ten organizations said the rent relief marketing strategy was very effective, and 12 groups said it was neither effective nor ineffective.

The responses were generally positive about the written materials and social media strategy, and they were more mixed about radio advertisements. When asked what was working well with the marketing strategy, most organizations pointed to the written materials being accessible (28 groups) or containing the important information (28 groups). More than half of groups pointed to the social media materials containing all the important information (23 groups) or using accessible language (21 groups). Several groups wrote in that the social media toolkits were the most effective part of the marketing efforts.

Fewer groups pointed to the radio advertisements as what was working well with the program. Only 13 groups reported the radio advertisements had all the important information and only 9 groups reported the radio ads were accessible. Some groups indicated the radio was not broadcast on the correct stations (5 groups), that it did not have all the important information (3 groups) and that it was broadcast at the incorrect times (2 groups). At the same time, some respondents identified local radio ads as a strength of the program, suggesting their effectiveness was

mixed. Several respondents wrote in that television ads would have been more effective at reaching their constituency.

There was significant feedback on the translations of written and social media materials. Many organizations indicated translations of written and social media materials were strengths of the marketing program. Many respondents indicated written materials (17 groups) and social media materials (13 groups) were correctly translated and that materials were translated into enough languages to meet the needs of their community (14 groups). However, a small number of groups indicated the written materials (3 groups) and the social media materials (2 groups) were not translated into the languages they need. These groups sometimes worked with populations of smaller minority language groups in California (e.g.; Armenian, Persian, Arabic, Hmong, Khmer) likely pointing to a need for additional supports for more underrepresented communities.

Finally, other aspects of the feedback about the marketing strategy that stood out were challenges with materials keeping up with changes in the program, and delays or temporary halts in marketing for the program over time. Several respondents pointed to successes in varying the content, such as to different family structures or to a diverse audience. However, others pointed to delays in delivery of materials, and to materials presenting inaccurate or inadequate information. This seems to be sometimes related to specific changes in the program structure. For example, one group explained the program kept marketing in their area even though the area had shifted to a local ERAP in place of the state program, and another explained the materials were inaccurate about changes in covering some utility payments. Finally, several organizations reported they would have preferred materials that allowed them to include contact information for their local LPN member group, and more generally to be able to tailor the materials to their local contexts.

Self-Reported Effectiveness of Local Partner Network

There are a wide variety of organizations that participated in the Local Partner Network, and they reported varying effects this work on their organizational capacity. Most groups reported that rent relief efforts made up a small share (less than 20%) of their budget, staff, and programming. The typical (median) number of new hires to expand organization capacity to conduct LPN activities was two new staff, with many groups stating no new hires were made for the program. However, ten organizations reported that their participation in the LPN made up most of their budgeting, staffing, and programming. Three of these organizations described themselves as grassroots and spent at least 90% of their budget and/or 70% of their programming on rent relief. Many of these same organizations hired ten or more full-time employees devoted to rent relief outreach.

Overall, LPN organizations reported that they are satisfied with the Local Partner Network. Roughly half (48%) reported they were very satisfied with their participation, and another 32% reported they are moderately satisfied. Respondents were particularly positive about the weekly partner meetings, with 84% reporting these weekly meetings went well. Groups reported that the funding (58%), regular reporting (53%), office hours (53%), regional meetings (40%), and trainings (40%) were the most supportive aspects of the Local Partner Network. At the same time, most groups reported that additional resources to conduct outreach would have boosted their effectiveness. More than half (56%) reported increased staffing would boost their effectiveness, and 42% reported increased funding would boost effectiveness.

While the Local Partner Network worked to increase access through outreach to under-served communities across California, LPN members advocated for changes within ERAP in order to help increase access. Of the LPN members that responded to our survey, 88% stated that they directed their concerns about the California COVID-19 Rent Relief Program to LISC

whereas 23% directed their concerns to the Department of Housing and Community Development. Some also reported their concerns to city, county, and public officials. Importantly, members reported feeling their concerns about the rent relief program and the LPN were heard and addressed. Roughly half reported their concerns about the program were significantly heard, one-quarter felt their concerns were moderately addressed, and one-quarter felt their concerns were slightly heard. Only one group reported their concerns were not heard at all.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In this report we provide a snapshot of the Local Partner Network (LPN) that shows where organizations were located, the core activities they conducted, and the frequency of outreach activity over the course of the program. We also provide detailed findings from a survey of 122 LPN organizations about their perceived effectiveness in outreach and support activities, challenges related to the application process, the effectiveness of marketing materials, and the perceived effectiveness of the Local Partner Network.

The next phase of this evaluation will leverage California's ERAP application data to measure more directly the impact of the LPN. In this subsequent report, we will compare application patterns to the outreach activity of member organizations, and we will analyze the applications that came into ERAP that were directly supported by LPN member organizations. A central focus of this upcoming research will be on the role of organizations in increasing access in under-served areas, in supporting tenants from under-served groups, and more generally on measuring the impact of the LPN in improving the accessibility and equity of emergency rental assistance across California.

This evaluation of LPN is part of a broader evaluation of the California COVID-19 Rental Assistance Program. Over the coming months, HIP will be releasing reports and analyses focused on the impact of several programmatic choices made the program (e.g.; to increase the generosity of payments and offer direct-to

tenant assistance), on the barriers faced in applying for and accessing assistance, and on the impact of ERA on housing stability outcomes including rental arrears, experiences with homelessness, and informal eviction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative have generously supported this research. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these funders.

WITH QUESTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT:

Deshonay Dozier
Assistant Professor, Department of Geography,
California State University, Long Beach
Deshonay.Dozier@csulb.edu

Katharine Nelson
Research Director, Housing Initiative at Penn
nelsonkl@upenn.edu