

Pending U.S. evictions spur growing concerns

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Renters and housing advocates attend a protest in August 2020 to cancel rent and avoid evictions, in Los Angeles, California [File: Valerie Macon/AFP]

Los Angeles, August 2 (RHC)-- Concerns are growing in the United States after a nationwide moratorium on rental evictions during the coronavirus pandemic expired this weekend, threatening to make millions of Americans homeless as early as Monday morning.

A freeze on evictions expired at midnight on Saturday, triggering a scramble to unlock billions of dollars in stalled rental aid and spurring blame-trading in Washington, DC.

Renters had been shielded from eviction after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) last year imposed a moratorium to keep people in their homes during the COVID-19 crisis, which has killed more than 613,000 people across the US and hit the economy hard.

But lawmakers failed to extend those protections and only \$3bn in aid has reached households out of the \$25 billion allotted to states and localities in early February. With the moratorium's expiration, more than 3.6 million Americans are at risk of eviction, according to The Associated Press news agency, including some in a matter of days.

Eric Dunn, director of litigation at the National Housing Law Project, told Al Jazeera the situation will differ between states, depending on whether state- and local-level eviction protections have been put in place.

But in some parts of the country, landlords have been able to begin the eviction process during the CDC moratorium, Dunn explained, and they have eviction orders ready to go.

"In some jurisdictions, especially in the U.S. South, like Florida ... sheriff's deputies can actually start physically putting tenants out on the street Monday morning," he said. "In a lot of places, we could see tenants being not just sued for eviction, but physically removed in large numbers very soon."

With the clock ticking away before the moratorium expired, the country was braced for heartbreaking scenes of families with their belongings at the curbside wondering where to go.

One of those at risk is Terriana Clark, who was living out of a car with her husband and two stepchildren for much of last year, before finding a teaching job and an apartment in Harvey, Louisiana.

Jobless again and struggling to pay rent after a bout of illness, the 27-year-old told The New Orleans Advocate she applied to a local assistance programme four months ago, but is still waiting for help.

"If it comes, it comes. If it don't, it don't," she told the newspaper. "It's going to be too late for a lot of people. A lot of people are going to be outside."

The Census Bureau's latest Household Pulse survey showed that of 51 million renters surveyed, 7.4 million were behind on rent and nearly half of those said they risked being evicted in the next two months.

Nearly 80 percent of households that are behind on their rent as of early July lived in coronavirus hotspots, according to a study by the Jain Family Institute. The US is seeing a spike in COVID-19 infections, spurred largely by the spread of the Delta variant.

Mary Hunt, who makes minimum wage driving a medical taxi, fell behind on her rent on a mobile home because she got sick with COVID-19. She was served with eviction papers, and frets over what she will do with her belongings, as well as her five cats and one dog.

"How do I choose which cats to keep? It's not going to happen. I'm not going to leave any of them behind," Hunt told National Public Radio this week.

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