

Have 90,000 people gotten rental help under Gov. Brown?

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During Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's final "State of the State" address on Feb. 3, she listed what she believes are key accomplishments of her seven-year tenure leading the state through a pandemic, historic wildfires and a contentious political atmosphere.

"Collaboration, a deep love for Oregon and our collective determination to continue making our state a better place for everyone have led to our successes every step of the way," Brown said.

The Statesman Journal is examining some of the governor's statements for accuracy and to provide context.

What Gov. Brown said

"In less than a year, we have helped more than 90,000 Oregonians stay safely in their homes."

What we found

The federal government has allocated more than \$46 billion meant to help low-income Americans who have faced "financial hardship" due to the pandemic pay rent.

Oregon Housing and Community Services, a state agency, has received \$289 million of that so far for emergency rental help.

OHCS is distributing that federal money, plus \$100 million allocated by the state Legislature in mid-December, through the Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program, or OERAP.

Oregon opened up applications for the emergency rental assistance program May 19. It started distributing the money in mid-June.

Oregon had distributed \$256 million to about 36,000 households as of Jan. 26, according to the state.

According to Oregon Housing and Community Services, that corresponds to about 94,600 Oregonians. (As of Feb. 8, after Brown gave her speech, about 39,000 households have received payments).

The department estimates the number of people in households by using information tenants provide in their applications, Delia Hernandez, a spokesperson for OHCS, said.

"Every applicant is required to enter the number of people in their household so that an appropriate income level can be found for them," Hernandez said in an email to the Statesman Journal.



Robert Quandt, a UPS employee in Tigard, holds a sign during a 2019 rally for affordable housing at the Oregon State Capitol. MICHAELA ROMÁN / STATESMAN JOURNAL

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sets limits on income for eligibility for the program, based on the number of people in a household, Hernandez said.

Separately, the Oregon Legislature in late 2020 set aside \$200 million in relief for tenants and landlords, which was distributed in 2021. The state's housing agency estimates 32,000 households were helped with that money.

Our analysis

Brown's statement is true, and in fact may understate the number of people who have been provided rental help. It also leaves out some context about the emergency rental help program.

Outmatched by the demand for help and beset by technical problems, the state has struggled to quickly get money into the hands of people who need it.

According to attorneys from the Oregon Law Center, hundreds of people in

the state were evicted while waiting for the state funds to come through. The state's 60-day "safe harbor" period wasn't enough to give the state time to catch up with the backlog.

Brown called an emergency meeting of the Legislature in December — her fifth in her seven years as governor — to extend eviction protections for Oregonians who applied for rental help but hadn't received money and to restart the rental help program with an additional \$100 million.

As of Feb. 8, about 15,977 applications are still waiting for processing by the state, according to Oregon's online dashboard. That means they've applied for help, but the state is waiting for more information from the landlord or tenant, or the state is reviewing the application.

About 6,900 of those are waiting for review because they were submitted after Jan. 26, when the application portal reopened after a two-month closure, and the state is paying those requests

based on need first.

The Oregon Secretary of State's Office, which houses government auditors, is planning to audit the rental assistance program.

"The state is facing criticism for stopping the application process for these funds even though it has been reported Oregon was one of the timeliest states issuing rental assistance," the draft audit plan for 2022-23 says. "Issues cited by legislators and other stakeholders include technical challenges with rental assistance software and public communication challenges."

This story is one in a series of articles checking statements in Gov. Kate Brown's final annual "State of the State" speech.

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