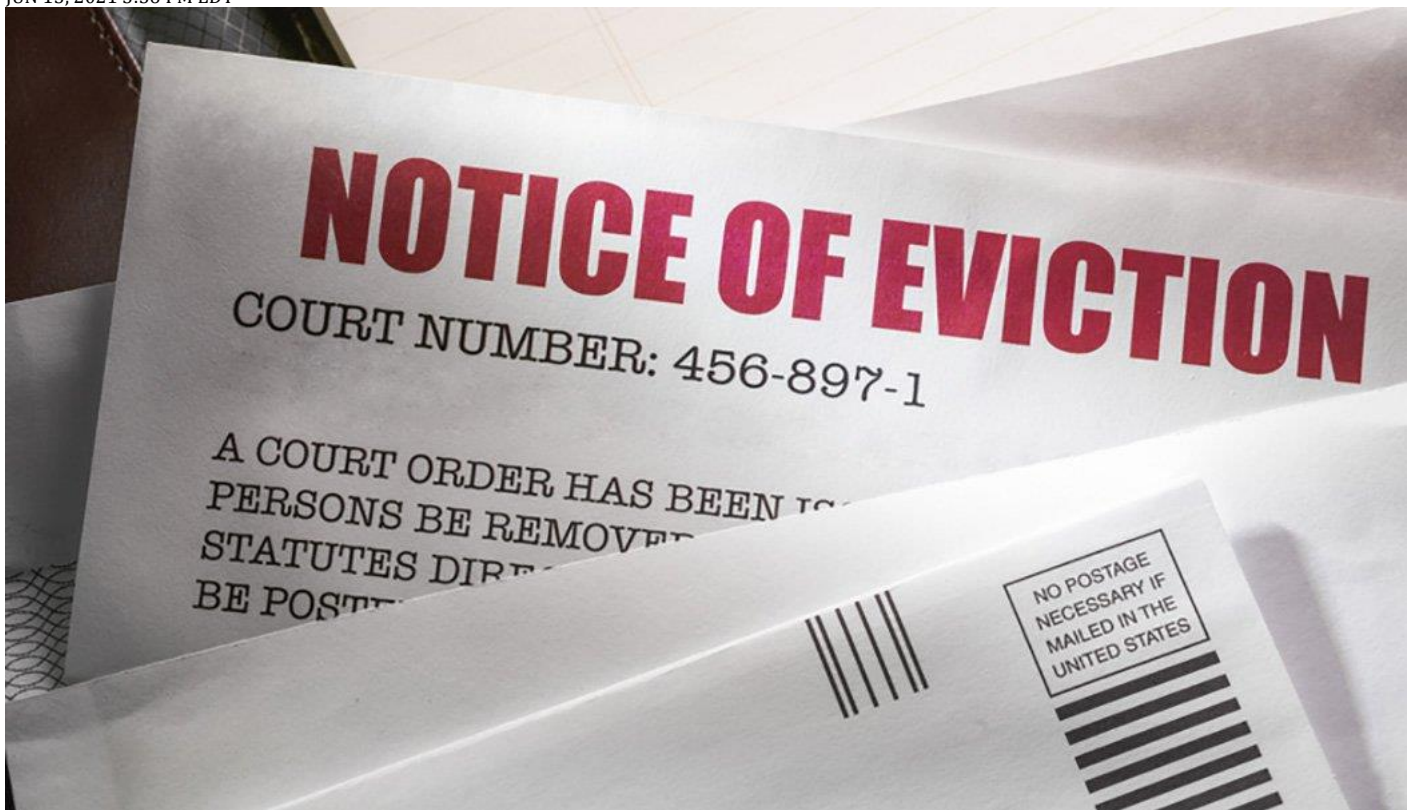


New program seeks to keep evicted Indian River County tenants in homes, reimburse landlords

By [Jon Pine](#)

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Qualified tenants can avoid eviction and have up to \$10,500 in back rent paid. Photo by Getty Images

A new partnership between Indian River County, the court system, the bar association, and a local philanthropic organization is making it possible for families facing eviction because of the COVID-19 pandemic to stay in their homes and pay up to \$10,500 of their back rent.

Since last September, the Housing Emergency Advocacy Response Team (HEART) program has arranged free legal representation for nearly 200 Indian River County families facing eviction because

of the pandemic. The program is joint effort by the [John's Island Community Service League](#) (JICSL), which provided \$150,000 to pay for a program administrator, [Florida Rural Legal Services](#) (FRLS), and the [Indian River County Bar Association](#) (IRCBA), which arranged for volunteer lawyers to help residents wade through the legal quagmire of evictions and foreclosures.¹

Last week, at the urging of Indian River County Judge Nicole Menz, county commissioners joined the effort by providing up to \$2 million – up to \$10,500 per case – to cover back rent as part of a new program in which landlords would enter into mediation in lieu of evictions. The funding comes from the \$4 million in CARES Act dollars that the county has allocated for rent and mortgage assistance for families impacted by the pandemic.²

Initially, commissioners had agreed to up to \$4,500 per applicant when they began the rent and mortgage assistance program last year, but County Attorney Dylan Reingold recommended increasing the amount of relief to \$7,500, plus another \$1,500 later, if needed. But commissioners Peter O'Bryan and Susan Adams settled on a cap of \$10,500, above and beyond the original \$4,500, in order to make the program more appealing to landlords.

As the CDC moratorium on evictions ends on June 30, "I expect this to become a problem in the next few months," Judge Menz told commissioners on June 8. "We think this is the best way to put (CARES Act) monies to use, and with any kind of luck we're going to spend every last dollar of that," she said.

Many landlords have not been paid since March, 2020, when the moratorium was enacted, Menz said. Judgements in some eviction cases have already been recorded, and come July 1, efforts to remove people from their homes will begin, she said. Other cases are still pending, while still other cases are likely, but have yet to be filed, Menz explained. The new program targets tenants and landlords in all three situations, she said.

"This is an excellent example of collaboration of agencies during this time when we all need to be doing our best," said Ellen Kendall, co-chair of the grants committee for the John's Island Community Service League. "It's been a very interesting collaboration amongst a lot of different people and organizations."³

The United Way has agreed to cover some of the court fees and other out-of-pocket expenses incurred by tenants and landlords, but the attorneys will provide their services pro bono, Kendall said. And local attorney Lisa Kahle was tapped to coordinate the mediation program.

Commissioners voted unanimously to approve the program and to revisit the \$10,500 cap in several months if Menz finds that a higher cap is necessary.

Tenants and landlords who would like to participate in the program should call Erin Harrigan at Florida Rural Legal Services at 888-582-3410.