

CHAPTER 246

AN ACT requiring the Department of Community Affairs to conduct surveys and report data related to homelessness in administering the Rental Assistance Navigation Program and amending P.L.2021, c.313.

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

1. Section 2 of P.L.2021, c.313 is amended to read as follows:

2. The “Rental Assistance Navigation Program” shall be established in the department and be administered by the department as a program to facilitate the diversion from and prevention of residential evictions due to nonpayment and habitual late payment of rent or for refusal to pay or agree to a rental increase. The department may contract the responsibilities of the program to one or more DCA navigators, as deemed appropriate by the commissioner. The purpose of the program is to provide support for tenants facing or at risk of eviction who have suffered financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and provide resources to alleviate the burden placed on landlord-tenant courts that may be facing increased caseloads and additional resource constraints as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

a. The department shall publish information about the program on the department’s Internet website, and shall engage in efforts to enhance public awareness of the program among the residential landlords and tenants in the State.

b. As part of the program, Resource Navigators shall be allocated to court vicinages in the State for one year beginning on the effective date of P.L.2021, c.313. Resource Navigators may be proportionally allocated to vicinages based on need, as determined by the number of nonpayment eviction filings in the vicinage or according to other criteria established by the department.

c. Each Resource Navigator shall attend eviction proceedings where possible in the Resource Navigator’s vicinage or vicinages and shall otherwise conduct outreach and work in conjunction with the department, the Administrative Office of the Courts, and local resource agencies of the county or counties that comprise the Resource Navigator’s assigned vicinage or vicinages to identify eligible tenants as defined by section 1 of P.L.2021, c.313.

d. A Resource Navigator shall provide services to eligible tenants in the Resource Navigator’s vicinage or vicinages in the form of information and connections to resources that may help the eligible tenant avoid eviction, which may include but need not be limited to:

(1) information about the availability of local, State, or federal rental assistance and other benefits, including benefits intended to provide relief due to hardships incurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and about how to apply for such assistance and other benefits;

(2) information about how to obtain protections against evictions, including those protections established in subsection d. of section 3 of P.L.2021, c.188 (C.52:27D-287.9) for households that were unable to pay rent due to circumstances arising from the COVID-19 pandemic;

(3) connections to counseling, legal services, and other resources related to helping eligible tenants prevent evictions;

(4) connections to other intervention supports for households facing financial hardships; and

(5) any other services or supports the department or the DCA navigator deems necessary to assist an eligible tenant in avoiding eviction.

e. A DCA navigator and a Resource Navigator shall have experience in fulfilling one or more responsibilities of the program and shall be qualified in accordance with criteria established by the department.

f. (1) The Department of Community Affairs shall conduct a survey of a newly evicted tenant who is willing to participate in a survey. The department shall develop the survey and make the survey available to Resource Navigators on or before the first day of the second month next following the enactment of P.L.2023, c.246 for the purpose of assessing the circumstances and needs of individuals facing eviction and homelessness. At minimum, the survey shall include questions concerning demographic information about the recently evicted tenant and their household, including the number of people in the household, and questions to assess the following:

(a) the ability of a recently evicted tenant and their household to secure housing immediately following eviction and in the future, including whether the recently evicted tenant has access to alternative permanent housing, a homeless shelter, or transitional housing, will seek other arrangements, or will be unsheltered;

(b) the municipality and county in which the recently evicted tenant was evicted and the municipality and county in which the recently evicted tenant will seek shelter or new housing; and

(c) the recently evicted tenant and their household's financial circumstances.

The department shall also establish record retention and reporting standards for surveys conducted pursuant to this paragraph which shall include regular reports of all relevant information to the organization commissioned by the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency to coordinate point-in-time counts of individuals and families experiencing homelessness, as required by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

(2) The department shall refer newly evicted tenants to local, State, federal, private, or nonprofit housing assistance and homelessness prevention services, as needed, and provide information to newly evicted tenants regarding how to apply for such assistance or services.

2. This act shall take effect immediately; provided, however, that the survey-related responsibilities of a Resource Navigator established pursuant to the bill shall remain inoperative until the department makes the survey available.

Approved January 8, 2024.