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Canceling rent during COVID-19: a Chicago resident, landlord and community organizers weigh in

By Maia McDonald



A rent strike mural in Hyde Park | Photo by Darius Griffin [The TRiibe]

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More than 6.6 million people applied for [unemployment aid](#) last week as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rock the U.S. economy. With the recent extension of federal social distancing guidelines and the Illinois stay-at-home order extended to April 30, many residents are worried about making ends meet. Two groups at the center of this rising tension are landlords and renters.

On Wednesday (April 1), Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) will defer rent for thousands of tenants living in public housing as long as the Illinois stay-at-home order remains in effect.

Additionally, over the past week or so, the city has launched several new measures to address housing concerns and to shield residents from potential economic fallout as the coronavirus crisis worsens. Those measures include:

1. [COVID-19 Housing Assistance Grant](#), one-time, \$1,000 grants available for rent and mortgage payments for Chicago residents impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (the application deadline was April 1).
2. A moratorium on evictions, foreclosures and utility shutoffs.

3. **Rental Assistance**, a program for individuals and families who are in immediate risk of eviction.
4. **Chicago Community COVID-19 Response Fund**, a support fund for nonprofits and community organizations serving people significantly impacted by the coronavirus outbreak.
5. **Chicago Small Business Resiliency Fund**, a \$100 million fund to provide small businesses with emergency cash flow during this immediate health crisis.

“We are working closely with the country and state to explore other possible solutions we can bring to residents who are in need,” Lightfoot said at a Wednesday (April 1) press conference.

Although these efforts will help thousands of Chicagoans in-need, where does this leave other residents with landlords who are expecting rent checks this week? At a recent press conference, Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker said that he did not have the authority to freeze rent because of a state law moratorium on rent control.

So many Chicago renters are taking matters into their own hands by participating in a rent strike, making a collective decision to not pay rent throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. There’s a [petition](#) floating online calling on Lightfoot, Gov. Pritzker and Cook County Chief Judge Timothy C. Evans to put a freeze on rent and mortgage payments indefinitely. It’s received 16,000 signatures so far.

Groups such as Working Family Solidarity, an organization striving to help Black and Latinx families with job and housing opportunities, and Autonomous Tenants Union, which represents tenants in Albany Park, have endorsed the petition. Both organizations believe a rent freeze is in the best interest of Chicago residents, especially since there’s no telling how long the impact of the coronavirus will last, even after the pandemic is over.

The TRiiBE spoke with a landlord, community organizations and a renter about the situation here in Chicago. Here is what they had to say. *(These interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity).*

On whether Chicago renters should pay rent during the COVID-19 pandemic

Peter Cassel, Director of Community Development of MAC Properties: “We are asking our renters to pay rent. But we understand that there’s both a global public health crisis and a global economic crisis, and we understand that that has impacted our residents in a wide variety of ways. For a number of the service workers and other similarly employed people within our portfolio, their businesses have been shuttered, they’re locked out of work and they may or may not have received their last round of paychecks tips. We know that some of our residents have lost all of their income.

On the other end of the spectrum we know that some of our residents work for local anchor institutions or large corporations, and were paid last Friday — just like they were paid two weeks before that, and have pretty good certainty that they’ll be paid in the next coming weeks. We’re encouraging residents who are having difficulty paying rent to contact us so that we can together go forward and continue in this agreement we both got into.”

Leone Jose Bicchieri, founder and executive director of Working Family Solidarity: “We have been urging our members, essentially through a lot of calls and texts for the last couple of months, to stop paying rent even before there was an official rent strike plan. We were simply urging folks who have no other source of income, especially undocumented people, that you should not go to work, stay home and not pay rent [or] a mortgage.

What we’re urging [our members] to think about is, if you want to look at it like a rent strike, that’s fine. But for [the] one’s who aren’t really sure, they just want to survive this whole nasty situation, we’re telling them it doesn’t make sense right now to pay rent when they might not be able to pay for food. It just makes no sense.”

Jasmine Barber, a 27-year-old Chicago renter on the South Side: "I'm not going to pay rent. I'm not. I just think my stance on it is that there are people [who] cannot fight for a rent freeze. And I'm speaking for the people who are voiceless. I want to use my power, use my position and use my privilege for the people who are voiceless right now, the people who can't stand up to their landlords, the people who are fearful for their lives and their jobs and their people. And most of us who have the privilege of being able to fight right now, especially my younger people, we have this energy, this fervor, this tenacity to fight, and I think we should use it."

Julia Duerst, organizer at Autonomous Tenants Union: "Right now we're not calling for a general rent strike. We're calling on tenants to talk to their neighbors and kind of assess what they need as a building. That's kind of our position on the rent strike for right now. We might reassess this position in a few weeks. But also, landlords should be prepared to face some default rent striking just because so many tenants across the city don't have money to pay rent right now."

On why Chicago renters should participate in rent strike

Jasmine Barber (renter): "We see this all throughout our communities and throughout the world. People use language and they use contracts and leases to abuse and to coerce people into violent situations. And this one is violence. People are being literally [ordered to stay home] and would be fired, arrested, given a misdemeanor for leaving. And I don't have a way to make money [because] I cannot leave my home. If [paying rent right now] is 'legally lawful,' then we might need to consider what laws and legal actions we are adhering to and who we need to fire and get out of office so that we can change [these laws]."

Leone Jose Bicchieri (Working Family Solidarity): "What we've told people is that if you're in a situation of absolute desperation, don't pay rent or utilities. Pay nothing except making sure your family can eat and stay home."

"We think that is very reasonable and a landlord can understand it. And if they don't, it's because they don't want to. Back to the health issue, [a rent freeze] helps everyone. Less people are forced to go to work. You have, maybe, thousands less people out there interacting in the Chicago area on a daily basis [being] exposed to infections. Talk about flattening the curve? That's how you do it."

Julia Duerst (Autonomous Tenants Union): “Rent strikes carry a lot of risk because the eviction filings are still open. So while there may be a moratorium on some of the court proceedings and the sheriff coming to your house, which is much farther down the line in the eviction process, just to be clear, the filings are still open. So if people are not paying rent today, they could, in theory, receive five-day notices from their landlord this week. If they do not pay by the end of that five-day notice, the landlord still could file a suit against them which would appear in the court docket, which is something other landlords search when they’re doing research on potential tenants, which could make it hard for people looking for future housing.”

ATU is not discouraging renters from striking — rather, we’re encouraging renters to fight for waived or reduced rent as a united group and mitigate the risk of retaliation by taking action, including striking, together.

Peter Cassel (MAC Properties): “Every one of our leases represents a voluntary transaction that we and our residents got into together. I think, at the moment we signed that lease, both of us fully expected to meet all obligations under the lease. We absolutely understand that many of our residents are not able to meet many of the obligations under the lease particularly due to the pandemic economic crisis. We understand that. However, there’s also a whole number of our residents who continue to have good jobs and continue to be paid, and we don’t see a reason for that household to not meet its obligations under the lease.

I have over 300 colleagues in Chicago, all of whom have been deemed essential workers by the state of Illinois [because] they care for the buildings we own. They clean the buildings we own. They sit at the front desks to make sure the buildings are safe for residents as they come and go. These are the folks that make sure the utilities are paid and the lights stay on. These are local, neighborhood residents. And one of the things we do with our rent money is pay my colleagues.”

On what needs to be done on a city, state and federal level to relieve tension between landlords and tenants

Jasmine Barber (Chicago renter): “I would hope that we could change something on a state and federal level. I feel like it only takes a flick of a pen because as much as people say, ‘Oh, we gotta go through the House and the Senate, and it’s gotta go through legislation and we gotta go through this segment of the judicial system, [we can] forget the rules right now. The pandemic is killing and wiping people away right now. If the people who are going to have to work for you after this is over and go back to business as usual after this is over, why are we not taking care of those people?’”

Julia Duerst (Autonomous Tenants Union): “Our demand for the state government and the city government is to freeze all rent and mortgage and utility payments. The idea there is that it will protect tenants in this moment from any possible retaliation from their landlord for not being able to pay rent or for prioritizing not working for health reasons. That’s something else we’ve been seeing: people forced to work outside the home because they feel like they have to make rent.”

On what will happen when the COVID-19 pandemic is over

Leone Jose Bicchieri (Working Family Solidarity): “[Gov. Pritzker] could do more and he has to continue to be pressured to do more. I’ve heard Cook County Sheriff Dart on video saying that he is not going to send his deputies to evict people. I don’t think that’s suddenly going to change over night. I think there’ll be tremendous political pressure and also social pressure with stuff like this. That’s why it’s good to stick together and say, ‘Hey, we can’t pay rent right now.’ Whether you want to call it a strike or being a human being who can’t pay rent, that’s what’s happening. I think momentum is building.”

Jasmine Barber (Chicago Renter): “I do believe that after [the pandemic], it’s not gonna go well for government officials. Like, people are going to remember how the government treated them. People are going to remember how the jobs and the landlords and the bosses and the CEOs treated people. And yes, people are facing grief and a lot of [other] things right now. Self care is so important right now. It is so pertinent right now that people are taking care of themselves and nurturing themselves. We are all going through many stages of grief. And the last thing somebody needs to be worrying about is [whether] they’re going to lose their home.”

Correction: This story has been updated to reflect a change in the name of community organization, Autonomous Tenants Union.

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[coronavirus](#)

[covid-19](#)

[mac properties](#)

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