March 20, 2020

**RE: Public Agency Actions Necessary to Protect Housing Stability, Public Health, and Local Democracy**

Dear Eastern Coachella Valley Mayors, Councilmembers, County Supervisors, Housing Authority officials, Tribal leaders, Coachella Valley Water District Board Members, Imperial Irrigation District Directors and County Sheriff:

While COVID-19 cases spread throughout the United States and across the world, and as governments at all levels consider protective measures for their residents, housing stability -- especially for the most vulnerable among us -- must rank as a critical priority in our actions. Bold, decisive and swift action to ensure that residents are able to remain in their homes during this time is necessary to minimize the spread of the virus, protect public health, and avoid potentially long-lasting and devastating consequences of the pandemic. We, the undersigned organizations, which collectively work alongside thousands of residents across the Eastern Coachella Valley and in your jurisdictions, urge you to take immediate action to adopt the recommendations outlined below.

On Monday, March 16th, Governor Gavin Newsom issued Executive Order N-28-20 acknowledging the authority of local governments to enact various measures to protect the housing stability of renters and homeowners across the state and encouraged local governments to act. Furthermore, on May 19th, the Governor issued Executive Order N-33-20, a mandatory Stay at Home Order. We call upon you now to not just meet but to exceed the Governor’s call to action by adopting unprecedented measures to protect residents, reduce physical and social
dislocation, and promote public health during these extraordinary times. It is critical for public agencies to ensure residents of the Eastern Coachella Valley are informed directly from their local representatives of these changes, how implementation will look like in their community, and in accessible written and language forms.

We commend the Imperial Irrigation District for their leadership in ensuring that residents within their jurisdiction are not left without electricity for non-payment during this time. IID is setting a great example and we urge other utility providers to do the same. Their official policy is stated as follows:

We know COVID-19 is creating financial hardship for some of our customers, and we’re committed to making sure they have electricity during this uncertain time. **To help, IID will not disconnect electricity to any customers for non-payment, until further notice. The district is also temporarily waiving customer late fees.** Customers who are behind on payment will still owe IID for services provided, however they will not be disconnected during this state of emergency.

Nonetheless, we ask that IID restore power to those households whose power was shut off before this crisis hit in our region. All entities should work hard to go above and beyond what is asked of them in order to better protect and assist the families that you serve.

Residents across the Eastern Coachella Valley have struggled to pay their rent or their mortgage long before this current crisis. Lack of access to safe and affordable housing along with consistent and affordable utility services is a common issue in the Eastern Coachella Valley and now exacerbated during this time. Low-income residents and renters are the most burdened, with majorities of low-income Eastern Coachella Valley households paying over half of their income on housing each month. For residents who already struggle to meet their housing costs in a normal month, the myriad of financial impacts of the coronavirus pandemic will simply make it impossible for many individuals and families to stay in their homes *without robust protective measures in place.*

And, unfortunately, we expect that an eviction crisis would be immediate and extensive in the various communities of the Eastern Coachella Valley, especially among already vulnerable populations including those within allottee and tribal land jurisdiction. All community members regardless of jurisdiction may be impacted and meaningful action will ensure residents are protected during these times. Without your swift and decisive action, this pandemic risks entrenching and compounding the housing crisis in the Eastern Coachella Valley and deepening existing inequities in housing opportunity, possibly for decades to come, while also further exacerbating the pandemic itself.
We urge all cities, counties, local housing authorities, utility providers, sheriff departments and other local and state agencies as applicable to protect the housing stability of residents and especially the most vulnerable populations by enacting ordinances with the following measures:

**Cities and counties:**

- A prohibition on all residential evictions, including mobile home parks, and foreclosures during the state of emergency. This is necessary to ensure that all residents can remain in their homes during the pandemic, without the confusion and difficulty that would result from requiring residents to individually substantiate the personal impacts of the coronavirus on their lives as well as the necessity of tenants appearing in court as defendants during a time when public health officials urge social distancing. Note that a current prohibition on evictions does not mean erasing missed rent payments but rather that tenants will not face the harsh and dangerous consequence of losing their homes in the midst of a global pandemic.

- A prohibition on assessing late fees for the duration of the moratorium.

- A requirement that all residential landlords extend expiring leases until at least three months after the last day the emergency declaration is in effect.

- A requirement that all landlords and residential mortgage holders develop and implement payment plans to allow financially impacted tenants and homeowners a reasonable amount of time to become current on rent or mortgage payments.

- A response and protocol, as well as emergency funding, for community residents living on allottee or tribal land to ensure they may also benefit from local and state policies to protect their housing stability and public health.

- A response and protocol for the protection of undocumented individuals who may need health services or public assistance and ensure there are no legal consequences in the present and future for receiving such assistance.

- A protocol that ensures counties and cities are enforcing California’s Sanctuary Law SB54, that makes California a "sanctuary state". This law prohibits local and state agencies from cooperating with ICE regarding “illegal” criminals who have committed misdemeanors.

- A protocol to enforce protective measures and education for all owners of farms and farmworkers in the Eastern Coachella Valley to ensure worker' public health is prioritized.

**Utility providers (including cities and counties as applicable):**
The prohibition on all utility shut-offs and late fees for the duration of the state of emergency; the immediate initiation of utilities at residences where previously shut off in order to allow good hygiene during the pandemic; and a requirement that utility providers allow ratepayers flexibility in arranging payment once the emergency ends.

Establish an official policy by ALL utility providers in the Eastern Coachella Valley to ensure providers will not disconnect utility service to any customer for non-payment and temporarily waive customer late fees until further notice.

**Public Housing Authorities:**

- Suspension of all hearings, meetings for recertifications, and other administrative procedures unrelated to new applications for residents to enter housing authority programs for the duration of the state of emergency.
- Continue to respond to resident housing needs especially as it relates to deteriorating conditions of mobile homes.
- Establish a protocol for emergency housing services for vulnerable residents.

**Sheriff departments:**

- The postponement by the sheriff of the execution of writs of possession or other lockouts that are not directly related to a protective order (e.g. TRO issued by a court related to domestic violence or elder or dependent abuse).

**All public agencies:**

- Adoption of proactive measures to notify tenants of their rights and resources available to them during the state of emergency, such as through inclusion of multilingual notices in utility bills, social media, televised news, and other outlets.
- To the extent feasible, set aside emergency relief funds to help residents who are financially impacted by the crisis pay basic expenses, secure basic resources including drinking water, and comply with social distancing directives.
- Work collaboratively with various agencies and organizations to respond to community needs and is especially inclusive of undocumented individuals.

We encourage you to seek the cooperation of other local and state government agencies in adopting and implementing these and other robust protections for tenants and homeowners. In addition to the measures listed above, we urge you to solicit the following actions and commitments by local courts and the state government:
The continuance by local courts of all non-emergency proceedings, including unlawful detainers, to limit potential exposures.

The dedication of state emergency relief funds to ensure that residents’ basic needs may be met, prioritizing relief to low-income and vulnerable residents.

In addition to these policy measures, it is critical that local governments adopt and implement practices that ensure that residents may continue to engage in the democratic process through the duration of the crisis while also protecting public health. As long as the California Department of Public Health and/or local health departments recommend that people should practice social distancing and refrain from gathering in groups, agencies should suspend business and decision-making that is not related to addressing the public and community health risk posed by COVID-19 to the extent feasible. Public agencies must ensure that the community can participate in public meetings through telephone and video conferencing that is accessible to all constituents. Additionally, interpretation and translation must be available for relevant languages. Lastly, local public agencies shall create a creative communication mechanism to ensure residents of the Eastern Coachella Valley are also receiving the correct and most updated information in Spanish and Purepecha from the state and their local jurisdictions. Not doing so creates panic and misinformation in the community. This includes press releases, social media posts, and press conferences to be conducted in languages other than English.

Many community leaders and community-based organizations have transitioned their services and attention to emergency response. Now more than ever it is critical to listen to the needs of residents and work together to respond and maintain constant communication with organizations directly working with residents. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the hard work and continued dedication of the farmworker community in the Eastern Coachella Valley that continues to work and sustain the local and regional food system during the pandemic. Ensuring that farmworkers are protected and the adequate preventive measures are in place to limit transmission among workers and the community is critical. Lastly, all public agencies should extend existing and anticipated deadlines, such as public comment deadlines in response to agency programs, land use and transportation plans, environmental documents, and other related matters.

On March 18, 2020, Lift to Rise, in partnership with a coalition of public agencies and non-profit organizations in the Coachella Valley published an Emergency Economic Preparation and Protection Plan¹ for the region to serve as an online financial and public services resource. With support from volunteers, this plan will help connect all eligible families and residents to every

https://www.lifttorise.org/protection
currently available form of public assistance in order to ensure residents' needs are met. Additionally, the plan now includes an Emergency Cash Relief Fund\textsuperscript{2} that will launch on March 27, 2020 that will provide $200 to households in the Coachella Valley that are financially impacted by COVID-19. This type of relief and coordinated effort must be extended to address all other needs of Eastern Coachella Valley residents.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of these recommendations and for your prompt action to protect all households in the community during this time. While this is an unprecedented and worrisome time, it is also an historic opportunity for Eastern Coachella Valley cities and counties to lead, work together and look out for one another, particularly our most vulnerable neighbors. Please contact us should you wish to find a time to discuss our requests.

In Community,

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Dr. Ryan Sinclair, Associate Professor, Loma Linda University - School of Public Health

Vanessa Moreno, Coachella Program Coordinator, COFEM

Neftalí Galarza, Trustee, CVUSD

Silvia Paz, Executive Director, Alianza Coachella Valley

\textsuperscript{2} Emergency Cash Relief Fund. \url{Here are Coachella Valley aid programs starting in the valley}
Odalys Beltran, Coachella resident

Maria Jose Rodriguez, Coachella resident

Olivia Rodriguez, Thermal resident