

**Written Testimony by Rene Solis - Chief Program Officer, BakerRipley
to The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
Hybrid Hearing on “Oversight of Pandemic Evictions: Assessing Abuses by Corporate Landlords
and Federal Efforts to Keep Americans in Their Homes”
Tuesday, July 27, 2021, at 10:30AM EST**

Good morning Mr. Chairman. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you and this committee today.

My name is Rene Solis, and I am the Chief Program Officer at BakerRipley, the largest social services non-profit in the State of Texas. We serve over half a million of our neighbors in the Houston region every year. Today, I'm going to share our experience and the best practices we've learned in ensuring that American Rescue Plan Act funding supports our most at-risk neighbors.

First, I want to thank you, our congressional leaders, for providing much-needed funding for our fellow Americans through the American Rescue Plan Act. This funding is critical because it allows so many vulnerable Americans to remain in their homes.

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began spreading throughout our region, devastating our economy and our neighbors. Amid that uncertainty, leaders from across our region in Houston and Harris County sprang into action to ease the profound financial burdens placed on neighbors by COVID-19.

Leadership is critical. In April of 2020, Mayor of Houston Sylvester Turner and Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo established the Housing Stability Task Force, led by Texas State Representative Armando Walle and Former Shell Oil CEO Marvin Odum, and including regional leaders with a broad base of experience and expertise: housing advocates, community-based organizations like BakerRipley, landlords, and representatives from the city and county.

It was through this collaboration that we determined that the best way to distribute funds and serve our neighbors was to create one program for the entire region with a single point of enrollment for both landlords and tenants. That decision to centralize the program was the catalyst that paved the way for the ultimate success of this program.

BakerRipley took on the responsibility of administering the program, and by the end of 2020 our Agency had distributed all of the \$70M allocated to the program for rental assistance. But it was clear to us that the need for help was still growing, and that any additional resources would need to be distributed quickly. Because so many of the neighbors who we talked to every single day weren't living month-to-month, they were living day-to-day.

Being nimble is critical. As additional funding became available, we wasted no time applying lessons learned from our 2020 program to improve the experience, the process, and the efficacy of our 2021 program.

In early 2021, Catholic Charities of Houston-Galveston joined our efforts, became a second administrator of the program, and helped expand our region's capacity to process eligibility and payments. They were able to adopt the same system and processes we created in 2020 to move quickly and provide relief to the region.

Together, BakerRipley and Catholic Charities have received \$159M in funding and are currently distributing it to those in need, relying on the system built last year, and integrating lessons learned and best practices developed.

Outreach is critical. We have added nine local organizations to serve as ‘navigators.’ These organizations focus on outreach, provide technical assistance to tenants and landlords, help identify and address gaps in the system, and offer other resources to tenants, while BakerRipley and Catholic Charities focus on eligibility and payments.

Our approach was and continues to be a holistic approach. Our neighbors always have help wherever and whenever they need it through our relationships with these navigator agencies.

Finally, our partners at the Alliance of Houston have established an Eviction Diversion Program. This program provides partner advocates for tenants in the rental assistance program who are in eviction proceedings.

Stakeholder buy-in is critical. An effective strategy of the Houston–Harris County Emergency Rental Assistance Program is what I refer to as the Texas Two-Step.

In the Texas Two-Step strategy, we recognize that both the landlord and the tenant play a valuable role in the distribution of rental assistance funds. The program has to work for both parties while keeping people in their homes.

To accomplish this, we had separate outreach, communication, and enrollment plans for the landlords and the tenants.

For the landlords, we recognized that if we pushed too much in a landscape with so much uncertainty, we ran the risk that landlords would choose to not participate in the program. So we worked with the Houston Apartment Association and coordinated discussions with the City of Houston, Harris County, and landlords to establish mutual agreement on the program terms for the landlord.

In May 2020, with our first wave of funding of \$15M, nearly 8,000 landlords participated. Today we have close to 19,000 landlords locations participating.

We provided accessibility to populations not well-served by other programs by making the application process easy for both landlords and tenants. The key to this success was a robust website and concise communications.

Partnership is critical. We partnered with Connective a third party vendor, to build a user-friendly intake platform, application processes, and technology-enabled coordination tools, and provide streamlined data analysis.

Connective built a single website for landlords and tenants at HoustonHarrisHelp.org. The website has everything in one location: the application, eligibility guidelines, documents, FAQs, and a function to check the status of an application.

Data access is critical. We have a real-time dashboard that shows where funds are being distributed throughout the region, providing the information we need to ensure equitable distribution of funds and immediately take action when needed. We know that for the region to truly prosper, it is imperative for everyone to have equitable access to essential resources and opportunities.

We continue to see impressive results. In 2021, we have distributed over \$135M in our region, helping more than 35,000 households. And we are not done yet. We are now processing applications for an additional \$53M round of funding that has been allocated to the City of Houston and Harris County, and we hope to distribute this money before the end of the CDC eviction moratorium.

The most important lesson we have learned through this process is the importance of collaboration. When we initially decided to take a regional approach, with the City of Houston, Harris County, and all our partners joining forces, this decision streamlined the process, and has allowed us to serve people better.

Drawing from the strengths of each partner involved in the process allowed us to be more efficient and effective. This is the power of true collaboration.

Thank you for inviting us to share our experience with you this morning. Mr. Chairman, I am happy to answer any questions that you or your colleagues may have.