March 19, 2020

Re: Protecting our communities during COVID-19 outbreak by providing protections for low-income renters and homeowners in Napa County

As community leaders and service providers, we are writing out of deep concern for the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations in our county. As the situation around us continues to rapidly unfold, we are particularly concerned for low-income renters and homeowners in Napa County for whom a reduction in work hours, or other COVID-19-related closures, will dramatically impact their income. Most low-income residents do not have financial safety nets and are most at risk for losing their homes due to loss of income during times of crisis.

Compounding matters is limited access to legal assistance and alternate housing options at a time when many Legal Services Corporations and leasing offices are closed in response to the pandemic. These factors, and resulting evictions, will only exacerbate an already tenuous rental housing market in Napa County at the height of a statewide housing crisis. It is vital to the safety and health of all in our county that residents are supported in staying housed during the duration of this emergency.

Governor Newsom issued an executive order (N-28-20) on March 16 that empowers local jurisdictions to halt non-payment evictions when that non-payment is caused by COVID-19. In light of the growing health crisis, we are asking the various jurisdictions in Napa County who are mandated to make decisions about housing to take the following immediate steps:

1. **Pass a Moratorium on all Residential Evictions and Foreclosures In All Napa County Cities:** We urge Napa County mayors and city council representatives to enact a moratorium on all evictions and foreclosures. In the short time since active measures to mitigate COVID-19 contagion have been in place, low-income residents are already experiencing the adverse impact of the epidemic very acutely. The vast majority of tenants at risk of eviction live paycheck-to-paycheck and work in the industries most affected by shut-downs, including hospitality, customer service, and childcare. These community members are now extremely vulnerable to the whims of a turbulent market, and could easily be forced to miss a rent or mortgage payment due to lost wages or tips.

   Even those tenants who are facing eviction or foreclosure for reasons not related to nonpayment may be experiencing financial difficulties and are unlikely to locate new housing. Many leasing offices are currently closed in response to the public health crisis, limiting alternative housing and substantially increasing the risk for homelessness by any evicted or displaced household.

   Moratoriums should cover all evictions and foreclosures, because it is dangerous
for any residents to be evicted, displaced, or otherwise made homeless during the pandemic, regardless of the reason. If tenants are displaced from their homes during this time, the County places all of its citizens at significant increased risk and further places a burden on the Napa County Housing and Homelessness Department to house these individuals.

Similar ordinances to protect tenants by temporarily staying evictions and foreclosures, or closing the Courts altogether, during the current health crisis have been, or are being, enacted in cities and counties across the region, state, and country. The President directed HUD to suspend evictions and foreclosures for tenants in public housing and homeowners with FHA-backed mortgages, respectively, through the month of April. Denver, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Sacramento, as well as the states of Delaware, New York, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Minnesota have imposed a moratorium on evictions. Locally, San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose are moving forward with similar ordinances. These moratoriums do not absolve tenants of their responsibility to pay rent or their mortgage, but allow them to remain housed until they are able to regain financial stability.

We are encouraged that Napa County Superior Court has decided to continue most civil matters (including eviction hearings and judgements), and that the Napa County Sheriff’s Department has also suspended non-essential services (including executing evictions), until April 10th. This highlights the need for a moratorium on all evictions in Napa County for the time being, as there is currently no legal mechanism through which a tenant may respond to an adverse action by their landlord, much less available legal assistance. The County’s imminent shelter-in-place order, effective March 20th, will further limit available assistance and resources for vulnerable tenants and homeowners.

We appreciate your leadership during these unprecedented times and understand that issues are complex and that difficult decisions need to be made. As community leaders and service providers, we are seeing the extreme impact that the situation is having on low-income residents. With the outlined protections in place, low-income residents can focus on helping to mitigate the spread of the virus and protect the health and wellbeing of their families. During this crisis, it is incumbent upon all of us to keep our community’s most vulnerable individuals and families healthy and safe.