

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 17, 2021

The Honorable Janet Yellen
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Yellen,

We write regarding implementation of the Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program, established by the year-end COVID-19 relief and FY21 funding legislation, which makes available \$25 billion to assist households that are unable to pay rent and utilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the U.S. Department of the Treasury (the Department) finalizes guidance for the ERA program, we urge you to exercise your authority to make the permissible uses of these funds as broad as possible under the law to ensure States, U.S. Territories, local governments, and Indian tribes have the necessary flexibilities to meet the emergent needs of household across our country.

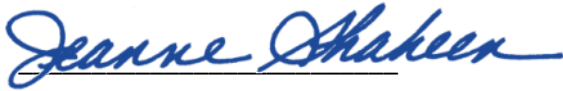
We have heard from public housing authorities, homeless shelters, landlords, housing finance authorities and affordable housing advocates across New Hampshire who are deeply concerned about the devastating impacts the COVID-19 crisis has had on housing security and homelessness in New Hampshire – challenges that existed before the pandemic and have only been exacerbated by the current public health and economic emergency. According to reports released by the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority, the high demand for apartments, short supply and low vacancy rate are taking a toll on affordable housing options available to Granite Staters. New Hampshire’s gross median rent for two-bedroom units has increased by 5% since last year and the gross median rent for all units has increased by 2%. A balanced market for landlords and tenants is considered to have a 5% vacancy rate; New Hampshire’s vacancy rate for all units is currently just 1.8%. In comparison, the U.S. vacancy rate is 6.6% and in the Northeast it is 5.5%.

The number of families experiencing housing insecurity is increasing and our homeless shelters have been forced to open up additional locations to safely accommodate the growing demand for beds while abiding by social distancing protocols, now is not the time for a narrow interpretation of how ERA funds can be put to use. The statute provides that ERA funds may be used for “other expenses” as related to housing incurred due, directly or indirectly, to COVID-19, as defined by the Secretary. We strongly urge you to provide as much flexibility as possible when defining eligible expenses to allow grantees to maximize the impact of ERA funds as they combat the growing affordable housing crisis.

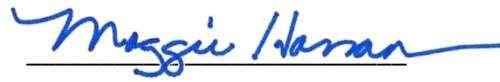
In addition, access to internet and telephone services have become vital as households shift to learning, working and receiving medical care remotely. Currently, utilities covered by ERA funds do not include these critical services. We request that internet and telephone costs be included as eligible expenses under the ERA program to the extent possible under the law.

States, U.S. Territories, local governments, and Indian tribes need every available resource at their disposal to meet the needs of our communities. Guidance from the Department that prioritizes flexibility will be pivotal in allowing grantees to help keep as many families housed as possible. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress



Chris Pappas
Member of Congress

CC: Matt Ammon
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th St SW
Washington, DC 20410