

# COVID-19 Eviction Prevention Program Leaves Positive Impact on Locals

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The Williamsburg Health Foundation has provided grants to the City of Williamsburg, York County, and James City County to help prevent evictions related to COVID-19. (Courtesy of Pexels)

**HISTORIC TRIANGLE** — In 2020, Americans experienced unprecedented challenges.

The entire country moved quickly to come up with ways to protect loved ones from an unknown virus that still happens to overshadow the entire planet moving into 2022 (albeit to a slightly lesser effect since the vaccines have become more easily accessible to the general public).

However, on top of the ongoing health risks, residents in the Historic Triangle also had to find ways to adapt to the negative economic impacts that placed many in positions that they never would have imagined they'd be in. Some of these residents in the community were struggling to make payments on their rent. The Williamsburg Health Foundation, City of Williamsburg, James City County, and York County all realized that this was a very pressing issue and came together to offer a solution.

Back in January of this year, The Williamsburg Health Foundation announced that the City of Williamsburg, James City and York counties would receive a \$1 million grant that was divided amongst the three localities. Williamsburg received \$270,000, James City County received \$430,000, and York County received \$300,000.

The grant was used to help prevent rental evictions during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, it was established for people who were able to make payments on their rent before the pandemic started but, due to the extra hardships caused by the virus, they were unable to pay their rent on time.

“The three jurisdictions got together with the Williamsburg Health Foundation. They approached us and said that they wanted to do something with housing. At that point in time, early on in the pandemic, we were concerned and wanted to make sure that people were able to continue to be housed,” said Division Manager for York County Division of Housing & Neighborhood Revitalization Abbitt Woodall. “We wanted to make sure that folks who had to stay at home to help their kids virtually learn, or who was otherwise impacted by COVID[-19], can keep their mortgages paid.”

One of the initial concerns was the amount of time it took for people to get assistance before the grant was established. There were also those who may have received the maximum amount of assistance from a federal program and that’s when the localities, like York County, were able to step in and help those individuals. To date, York County has expended over \$163,000 providing assistance to about fifty-one families.

“So we’ve spent a little over half of ours. We never thought we would still have money. We’ve required everyone to apply first through the rent relief program that the state is managing,” said Woodall. “Ours kind of comes in after that. If they either don’t qualify for the state program or they qualify, but they need additional assistance beyond what the state can provide, then we step in.”

### The Local Impact

Michael Cook is a resident of the City of Williamsburg and is one of the individuals that has relied on the grant to get his life back to the way it was before the pandemic.

“I had a job where money was good, everything was good, but when this COVID[-19] situation hit, it put everything at a standstill as it did for everybody. So I ended up going through my savings. I ended up going through everything that I had,” said Cooke. “I got down to the point to where no money was coming in. I wasn’t working, and I didn’t know what to do, and I didn’t know where to go. I was never in a situation where [I was late] with my rent. So when I had called the rental office to explain my situation that’s when they turned me over to the city to let me talk with Mr. Gerardi and he changed my life. He saved my life because I was on the verge of losing everything.”

Cooke admits that people may be nervous about seeking assistance programs because of how they look at a lot of factors based on the individual’s income. However, when he talked with the City, they were able to help figure out the financial situation.

“When I talked to him he just said, ‘We’re going to do what we can to help,’ and I remember that. He was so sincere, and he stayed in constant contact with me to make sure I was turning in everything that I needed,” said Cooke. “Then, next thing I know, I get a phone call saying, ‘Hey, we’ve taken care of everything. It’s been sent over to the rental office.’ Then, after that, everything started turning around for me. I was back to work and everything was starting to take off again.”

Cooke relayed that the whole process took about two weeks; a rather quick turnaround that dramatically changed his life. Cooke’s story is one of many from the Historic Triangle about how someone has utilized this local funding to make it through last year’s crisis.

“It’s been huge for the folks that we’ve been able to help. We’ve had folks who lost a spouse, who suddenly seen their income cut in half, and they’re committed to this lease that they’re trying to find ways to make up for that loss of income,” said Woodall. “We were able to help people in that situation. Then also, there were the folks that had gotten sick. We had people who are essential workers who had to go into work and then came down with COVID[-19], and weren’t able to go back to work for a long period of time.”

#### How Can Residents Seek Financial Help?

“Don’t be afraid to look more into it. If you need assistance don’t be afraid to ask because the staff’s number one goal is to make sure everybody is taken care of, and they do it well. You never know what you do and do not qualify for if don’t go out and ask,” said Cooke. “They saved a person’s life and they don’t even know it.”

Residents seeking rent relief are asked to reach out to a representative at their specific municipality:

- Williamsburg: (757) 220-6161
- James City County: (757) 259-5340
- York County: (757) 890-3885