

IDAHO ASSET BUILDING NETWORK

COHORT CASE STUDY

The Power of an ERA Equity Working Group

"Individuals and families thrive when they have access to stable and affordable homes, and communities are stronger overall when residents can avoid the high financial and emotional costs of evictions."

-Kendra Knighten, policy associate at the Idaho Asset Building Network



Idaho Asset
Building Network

Coalition Partners: American Association of Retired People of Idaho, the Idaho State Independent Living Council, the Intermountain Fair Housing Council, Jesse Tree of Idaho, Protecting Our Dreams and Empowering Resilience (PODER) of Idaho, Community Action Partnerships of Idaho, and the United Way of Southeastern Idaho

Background

The State of Idaho was allocated \$200 million in Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) 1 funds and \$152 million in ERA2 funds. Use of the funds required approval by the Idaho legislature. By October 2021, ERA1 funds were being disbursed, but ERA2 funds had yet to be approved. Stakeholders were concerned that new ERA guidance provided by the U.S. Department of the Treasury (Treasury), combined with slow ERA1 spending, were making lawmakers hesitant to approve more rental and utility assistance.

In addition to the approval of funds, community organizations had concerns about application processes and policies enacted by both the Housing Preservation Program (HPP) and Boise City/Ada County Housing Authorities (BCACHA) that led to low distribution rates and barriers to accessing assistance, such as overly burdensome documentation requirements and an over-reliance on online portals that were inaccessible to Idahoans without internet access.

Further, the data provided by the programs were fairly basic and included little demographic or other information from which to measure ERA program successes and identify challenges. Community

involvement was needed to accurately assess the programs' real-time impact on households receiving assistance. The Idaho Asset Building Network had strong relationships with community coalitions, ERA administrators, and legislators and thus was a natural choice when it came to leading ERA spending and reform efforts.

To encourage the Idaho legislature to authorize the remaining ERA2 funds and incentivize Idaho ERA programs to accelerate spending, the Idaho Asset Building Network (IABN) created an ERA Equity Working Group. The Equity Working Group comprises community partners representing people disproportionately impacted by evictions and back rent, including the State of Independent Living Council, Intermountain Fair Housing Council, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) of Idaho, United Way of Southeastern Idaho, Community Action Partnerships of Idaho, and Protecting our Dreamers and Empowering Resilience (PODER) of Idaho.

Community Advocacy to Push for the Allocation of Remaining ERA2 Funds

To encourage legislators to approve the remaining ERA2 funds, members of the ERA Equity Working Group conducted significant outreach to Idaho's

state lawmakers and governor's staff. They hosted a Housing Day of Action at the Capitol, three meetings with the governor's office, and meetings with six legislators on the Joint Finance and Appropriations Committee. The ERA Equity Working Group also produced a factsheet highlighting the continued need for rental assistance in Idaho and delivered a letter signed by 27 Idaho organizations and businesses in support of ERA funding to every member of the Idaho State Legislature. These advocacy efforts were further enhanced by anecdotal information collected through three separate surveys launched in English and Spanish to learn more about the experiences of renters applying for assistance through one of Idaho's programs.

Idaho Asset Building Network and partners ensured the continued availability of the state's ERA program through FY23 by securing legislative approval for \$38 million in ERA2. Prior to outreach efforts, many legislators were under the impression that it was not necessary for the program to continue providing assistance after June 2022 due to a lack of need as the economy recovered. Clearly, however, the need among Idahoans for support did continue.

Once the approved funds were distributed to ERA programs, the number of households served almost doubled because of ERA2's flexible guidance. All funds were quickly expended, leading advocates to renew their push for the remainder of ERA2 (\$32 million) to be approved. The governor agreed to include the request in his budget proposal, leading to the final approval of all ERA funds by the State of Idaho in March 2023.

ERA Program Improvements

Early advocacy efforts resulted in the HPP redesigning much of its online application form to ensure it was more accessible to individuals with disabilities – for example, by making the form compatible with screen reader technology. Additionally, due to feedback from advocates indicating that people without internet access had struggled to apply for assistance, the state program significantly improved its case management and follow-up processes contracting with community

organizations to conduct ERA outreach and help people apply for the program at local events.

Working group members met with ERA program administrators to provide input on equitable outreach efforts to impacted Idahoans, program effectiveness, barriers to access, and the community engagement sub-granting process. Working group members encouraged programs to improve their data transparency efforts and published ERA snapshots of the program data that did exist. Group members also encouraged the adoption of statewide eviction prevention and diversion measures through judicial partnerships. One of the most significant policy changes was the reversal by HPP of its previous hesitance to sub-grant funding to community organizations to assist with submitting applications in 2022. The sub-grants enabled community organizations to commit staff time to helping individuals navigate the complicated application process. Six organizations across Idaho received sub-grants, including Intermountain Fair Housing Council, Jesse Tree, South Central Community Action Partnership, Blaine County Charitable Fund, and Western Idaho Community Action Partnership.

IABN advocacy efforts also ensured that the authorization for ERA funding included language giving the state authority to transfer funds to local ERA programs when local funding was exhausted. Prior to this addition, the Boise/Ada County Housing Authority (BCACHA) program distributing assistance in Ada County and the City of Boise struggled to keep their programs active as ERA1 funds were depleted. The new language gave the State of Idaho the ability to transfer funds to BCACHA to help ensure it could continue to assist renters in its program area.

Future Focus

Many Idaho renters are still struggling to remain stably housed amidst skyrocketing rental prices, a shortage of affordable and available homes, and weak consumer protections for renters throughout the state. The Idaho Asset Building Network is using a second ERASE grant to enhance consumer protections for renters and stand up a permanent state-funded emergency rental assistance program.

IABN is working with the ERA Equity Working Group to assess the scale of financial assistance needed to create a permanent ERA program in Idaho, develop a policy proposal for a permanent ERA program, and create an advocacy strategy for the passage of the program during the 2024 legislative session.

To address the imbalance of power between renters and landlords, IABN will convene a Fairness in Renting Working Group to develop a package of

consumer protections for renters that could include rent and fee protections, right-to-counsel and mediation services, source-of-income protections, and familial protections. Once a package is agreed upon, the Fairness in Renting Working Group will identify legislators to sponsor the legislation during the 2023 session and engage in advocacy activities, including by hosting a housing advocacy day, publishing op-eds, and meeting with legislators.

End Rental Arrears to Stop Evictions (ERASE) 2021 – 2022 Cohort

[NLIHC's End Rental Arrears to Stop Evictions \(ERASE\) 2021-2022 Cohort](#) was a group of 38 state and local nonprofit partners that conducted on-the-ground partnership development, capacity building, outreach and education, policy reform, and systems change work to ensure that emergency rental assistance (ERA) funds reached renters and small landlords with the greatest need for assistance - especially Black and Indigenous people and people of color, and other marginalized people and communities - and to build support for long-term housing solutions.