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# Opinion: Don't let Congress give up on Virginia's renters

By **BRIAN KOZIOL**  
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FEEDBACK

Demonstrators hold signs as they listen to speakers against evictions outside the Science Museum of Virginia prior to the start of the state Senate session at the facility on Aug. 18, 2020 in Richmond. (AP Photo/Steve Helber) (Steve

Helber/AP)

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In early 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, Needham “Carolina” Wilder moved into his new apartment in Hampton Roads — only the second home he’d ever been able to call his own after a life of tragedy and crime left him without access to the housing or support he needed to get back on his feet.

Wilder was able to afford the apartment thanks to a housing voucher that helped him cover a large portion of the cost of his rent with Virginia Supportive Housing. Having access to affordable housing has allowed Wilder to turn his life around; he’s since gotten a working cell phone, health insurance plan and learned to drive.



Brian Koziol is executive director of the Virginia Housing Alliance, located in Richmond. (HANDOUT)

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Wilder said that to him, his apartment means “stability, safety, and staying out of trouble.” But, most significantly, “it’s a way to be reached.”

Wilder’s is a success story. But far too many Virginia families are not as fortunate. More than 215,000 Virginians are behind on rent payments, forcing families to make impossible decisions, and pushing others out of their homes entirely. The rates of families late on rent are highest for families with the lowest incomes and people of color, reflecting long-standing racial inequities. Many of these households pay more than half of their income on rent and utilities. Virginia families urgently need more help.

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Thankfully, there’s a solution. But we need Virginia’s senators on board to make it happen.

The Build Back Better Act currently being negotiated by Congress includes significant funding for housing vouchers that would help our lowest income Virginians such as Wilder obtain rental housing that they otherwise couldn’t afford. Vouchers cap the amount that families pay for rent and utilities at 30% of their income, and the voucher covers the rest.

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This funding is critically needed as only one-in-four families today that are eligible for vouchers are able to get one. In fact, Virginia has one of the longest wait times in the country for vouchers, with families waiting more than three years on average and many never receiving a voucher at all.

But this critical boost for housing vouchers isn't a done deal yet.

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Sen. Mark Warner recently said he would vote against the Build Back Better Act if it doesn't include additional funding for homebuyers. Helping families become homeowners is a significant step in building wealth, and it should be done in a way that also prioritizes securing access to stable and affordable rental housing where families can flourish.

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Congressional committees crafting the Build Back Better Act are only given a finite amount of money for housing investments, meaning they must be intentional with how they allocate and prioritize these resources. Adding funding for other housing priorities such as homeownership, which are less tightly targeted to those with the greatest need, would likely come at the expense of our lowest-income families who are struggling to just keep a roof over their heads. We can't afford to turn our backs on our most vulnerable families.

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The new funding for housing vouchers, passed by the House committee and now being debated amongst congressional leaders, would invest \$75 billion, which

would not only help extremely low-income families stay in their homes, but also help people experiencing homelessness and domestic abuse survivors find safe, stable and affordable housing.

Housing vouchers are one of the most effective ways to support low-income people and advance racial equity in the commonwealth and across the country.

Nationwide, housing affordability challenges are concentrated among people of color due to racist practices and disinvestment in housing for communities of color, along with other structural factors that have held these communities back.

We have an opportunity to help put an end to Virginia's growing housing crisis. Sens. Warner and Tim Kaine must fight for all Virginia families and ensure that funding for housing vouchers is not reduced in the final bill.

**Brian Koziol** is executive director of the Virginia Housing Alliance, located in Richmond.

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