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Washington County board reviews spending of coronavirus aid

The Washington County Board of Commissioners began work July 14 allocating the \$31.7 million that the county received to assist residents in recovering from the financial fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, and cover county response costs.

The money is part of the more than \$1.8 billion that the state received from the federal government through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES), which is overseen by U.S. Treasury guidance. Of that amount, the state has provided \$841 million to its counties, cities, and townships to cover the local costs of responding to the pandemic.

The county's plan calls for a major portion of the funding to provide direct assistance to individuals and business; \$5.25 million will be used for financial assistance to county residents, and \$10 million will be used for economic and small business assistance. Of the \$5.25 million directed to assist residents, \$4 million be allocated to rental assistance and provide short-term mortgage assistance to avoid eviction or mortgage foreclosure. The additional \$1.25 million will pay for basic needs for residents in need of safe housing during the pandemic, provide emergency food support, transportation, hygiene and cleaning supplies, and child care assistance to families impacted by the pandemic.

The county's Community Development Agency (CDA) will administer the county's small business assistance through the Open for Business program, which currently works with the CDA. Assistance will be in the form of grants of up to \$15,000 to small businesses to reimburse the costs of business interruption caused by required closures or costs incurred to respond to the pandemic, including costs for changes that are necessary to operate safely under the public health guidelines. Most small

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business with fewer than 50 employees and less than \$3.5 million in annual revenue will be eligible to apply.

The county will use a portion of the funding to reimburse itself for expenditures made to manage the pandemic, and modifications made to county facilities to allow county business to continue safely. Reimbursement of costs will incur for county staff that were pulled away from their regular duties to respond to the pandemic. The CARES Act requires that the payments only be used to cover expenses that are necessary expenditures incurred due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. The money must be spent by the end of the year.

The county will also use funds for the acquisition and distribution of medical and protective supplies, including sanitizing products and personal protective equipment. It may also use the money to pay the expenses for public safety, public health, health care, human services, and similar employees whose work was to mitigate or respond to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

The spending plan calls for \$1.5 million for public health work, including money to assist with contact tracing COVID-19 cases in the county, and the cost for a program to test residents in long-term care facilities in the county during the remainder of 2020.

The federal funding will also cover nearly \$1.5 million that has already or will be spent for equipment and facility modifications to maintain safety in county facilities. Other money will be used to pay the added expense of administering the primary and general elections, as well as costs incurred to support county teleworking.

In addition to the money that the county received, cities and townships in the county received a total of \$19 million in aid to be used for similar expenses at the city and township level.