



## **Safe at Home: A Snapshot of Irvine’s Most Vulnerable Populations**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the phrase “safe at home” has risen to serve as one of the key messages in encouraging social distancing practices. While important to the larger mission of flattening the curve of the disease, this messaging does not address a critical fact: even in a community as affluent as Irvine, highly vulnerable populations exist that lack financial stability in their own home – and they need all the help we can provide. In addition to being low-income, these citizens include veterans, adults living with developmental disabilities and individuals at risk of homelessness.

As a key provider of affordable housing for the City of Irvine, the Irvine Community Land Trust (ICLT) has more experience than most when it comes to dealing with these particularly vulnerable groups. Long before the pandemic began – since our inception, in fact – we’ve always made a point of regularly assessing our residents’ health and wellness needs, striving to ensure their housing comfort. Our most recent checks have effectively taken a pulse of how the ongoing pandemic is affecting Irvine’s low-income families and individuals.

In effect, the populations that need affordable housing currently are undergoing multiple crises: not only the global health crisis, but also extreme financial and job-related pressures well beyond what the general populace is experiencing. While almost no one is immune to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these residents need the most help.

### **The Hard Numbers of Financial Pressure**

At the average ICLT property in April, we saw alarming numbers coming out of our regular check-ins – and it is likely these percentages will rise – including:

- 10 percent of residents unable to pay rent
- 13 percent of residents requesting aid in applying to the Employment Development Department
- 21 percent of residents asking for help accessing rental assistance
- 31 percent of residents in need of educational assistance for their children
- 33 percent of residents needing food assistance

In keeping with our mission, the ICLT is working with all of these residents during these troubled times and ensuring that they have what they need – be it rent deferment or more direct access to resources. We are working with longtime community partners – such as Families Forward, the Orange County Family Solutions Collaborative and South County Outreach – to ensure these residents have everything they need, or, at the very least, are directly connected with a group that can offer further assistance. In the meantime, we’re drawing from our internal resources to cover unit costs in lieu of rent payments and are working to help our residents secure grants to eventually cover the rent they’ve asked to be deferred – up to four months, in most cases.

It’s an unprecedented situation to be sure, but through a combination of concentrated outreach, Emergency Solutions Grants and rental assistance, we hope to minimize the financial pressures existing for our residents in the midst of this crisis.

### **A Continuing Crisis**

Gathering this data helps us know where we need to concentrate our efforts, but it also speaks volumes to the importance of affordable housing, both in and outside of a crisis. While ICLT residents earn well below the area median income, they are shielded from some of the heaviest financial burdens that typically come with living in one of the most expensive areas of the state. Even with rental assistance, up to one-third of our residents will still need help in some of the most essential areas – food, education and employment among them – in order to achieve having a quality home life.

**“...this ‘new normal’ feels entirely too familiar to many Irvine residents who have long been struggling to pay for market rate houses and apartments.”**

The current pandemic certainly affects all of us, in varying ways and degrees, but this “new normal” feels entirely too familiar to many Irvine residents who have long been struggling to pay for market rate houses and apartments. Even within our own walls, we can see individuals and families who need an occasional helping hand to keep their lives afloat; just imagine what life is like for the untold numbers still living with no form of support.

The affordable housing crisis has been an ongoing issue for decades, and a “return to normal” isn’t going to do anything to help those already desperate before COVID-19 made its appearance. That’s why we are actively creating new affordable housing opportunities wherever possible, including new and upcoming home ownership projects. Irvine is a great city, and we believe that helping those in need shouldn’t end – or begin – only when there’s a greater crisis. All of Irvine’s residents should feel proud and secure in calling it “home.”