

Governor Baker hopes for eviction moratorium bill in days

By Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

Gov. Charlie Baker hopes lawmakers can resolve differences and send him a viable bill pausing all eviction and foreclosure proceedings statewide by next week, he said Saturday while touting aid that will flow to undocumented immigrants who are ineligible for unemployment benefits.

During a Facebook Live interview with El Mundo Boston that host Alberto Vasallo III translated into Spanish, Baker said he is precluded by law from temporarily banning housing removals via executive order but that his administration has been working with the Legislature to try to prioritize the issue.

The House and Senate have been unable to agree on language of a moratorium for weeks despite sharing support for the concept. On Thursday legislators established a conference committee, a process lawmakers turn to when they are unable to informally work out disagreements.

Baker did not explicitly endorse either branch's approach, and he said he hopes negotiators find compromise soon on something he can support.

"I know they're working on it this weekend and my hope is by next week they'll get a bill to me that I can sign," Baker said.

A trial court standing order has halted most hearings, but advocates say a formal moratorium is necessary to protect the

most vulnerable from pressure.

Baker stressed to viewers that his office has staffers who speak Spanish and that several local and regional organizations can help tenants or homeowners facing financial pressures amid the coronavirus pandemic, particularly those who may feel “bullied” by landlords or banks because of language barriers.

Under existing state law, Baker said, tenants have 60 days to resolve issues before removal and homeowners have 90 days. He recited the phone number for his office’s constituent services department and pledged to provide El Mundo with a list of resources to pass to viewers.

“It’s outrageous that anybody would bully anybody at this point in time,” he said. “These are the things that a lot of the folks who do this work for a living who are funded by governments and by private agencies can help people with, and that’s why it’s important that we get that list to you.”

Local leaders in mostly nonwhite communities have warned of the disparate impacts the COVID-19 outbreak is having, particularly in virus hotspots such as Chelsea and Revere.

Baker told El Mundo that he has had “a bunch of conversations” recently with municipal officials in those two cities as well as Lawrence. Over the next “day or two,” he said, the administration and the cities would partner on locally targeted response initiatives to limit the emergency’s toll.

Asked about how to support Massachusetts undocumented immigrants who are out of work amid widespread business shutdowns but do not qualify for unemployment aid, Baker said he agreed that the community faces “a giant problem” and needs support.

The governor said officials had undocumented immigrants partly in mind when they built the Massachusetts COVID-19 Relief

Fund, which he and First Lady Lauren Baker unveiled Monday and which already has \$15 million raised to distribute to local organizations.

“One of the main reasons for doing this was because we knew we had a big community out there of people who weren’t going to qualify for any of these benefit programs and we wanted to have a vehicle through which we can make resources available to them,” Baker said.

While Baker was live on the interview, his office announced the launch of a Spanish-language and mobile-friendly unemployment benefits website.

Another new initiative took effect Saturday making free COVID-19 tests available to grocery store and supermarket workers at two drive-through sites. The sites, located at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough and the Big E fairgrounds in West Springfield, had previously limited access to first responders but will now accept grocery employees who face risks of infection as essential workers.

Those interested in acquiring a test can do so even if they do not show symptoms, though they must ask supervisors or managers to schedule appointments on their behalf.