

Property Taxes 101

Here's what you need to know about property taxes and the property tax relief programs available in nearly every state to those who qualify.

What Are Property Taxes?

Sales tax is pretty straightforward. When you buy a cell phone, for example, you pay the taxes added to the purchase price.

Property tax is much the same, except unlike sales tax, homeowners and property owners pay property tax every year, either annually, quarterly, or bi-annually, depending on local laws.

While tax rates — what percentage you pay in taxes — vary by state and county, property tax is always based on the value of the home or property such as an apartment building.

To determine the value, local governments make property tax assessments — a professional estimation of the market value of the property. The assessment covers not just the dwelling, it also typically includes the land on which the property is located.

Local governments then use the assessments to calculate what homeowners and property owners owe in property taxes, which are used to fund water and sewer improvements, and provide law enforcement, fire protection, education, road and highway construction, libraries, and other services that benefit the community.

What Are Property Tax Assistance Programs?

Local governments offer “tax relief” through property tax assistance programs to help homeowners pay fair

property taxes based on qualifying situations, such as earning a low income. Nearly every state, including the District of Columbia, has programs that offer relief from property tax bills. Most programs are for homeowners, but some renters can qualify for relief, too.

Most recipients of property tax assistance programs either pay lower taxes or get direct tax refunds. While many people know they may receive money back on their income taxes when they file a return, few people know there's property tax relief available that could put money back in their pockets.

Nationwide, AARP Foundation estimates more than 9.3 million older adults living on a limited income may be eligible for money-saving property tax relief – but only 8 percent apply to their state's relief programs.

As you might expect, every state or locality offers its own unique programs, each with different eligibility requirements. Assistance is typically given to older adults, people earning a limited income, veterans, or people with disabilities.

Some states even offer property tax credits or rebates to renters, based in part on the actual amount of rent they paid.

Here are a few of the ways property tax relief works:

Homestead Exemptions

Removes a portion of the assessed home's value so less tax is owed on the property.

Property Tax Credits

Offers a tax credit that reduces the amount of property tax owed.

Circuit Breakers

Provides households with a tax refund based on their income.

How to Apply for Property Tax Relief

The first step is to review the property tax relief program's eligibility requirements. If a homeowner or renter meets these requirements, they can complete and submit an application, which can usually be found on the website of the government agency administering the program. In some states, like Minnesota, the agency may be the state's Tax or Revenue department. In others, like North Carolina, it may be a county office. Application forms vary in length, and can sometimes seem complicated. But generally they ask questions related to a person's eligibility criteria, such as age, household size and income, property location, etc.

For many property tax programs, homeowners and renters must provide documentation to show they meet all of the program's criteria, and may be asked to provide:

- Valid identification that shows a person's age, disability, or veteran status
- Proof of total income and source of income
- Proof of property ownership or rent paid
- Past property tax payment documentation

In addition, homeowners and renters need to submit their completed applications with the required documentation by the application deadline. Deadlines for property tax relief also vary by state and can be tricky. In fact, the various programs offered by a state can have different deadlines.

What's more, state agencies may update the application forms and program criterias for the new year, with new application forms

becoming available then or at different times of the year. **It is critical to use the correct form for the tax year in which you are applying for property tax relief.**

Launched in 2019, AARP Foundation Property Tax-Aide helps people more easily find, understand, and apply for property tax relief programs where they live. Property Tax-Aide is currently available in 13 states including the District of Columbia, and we're working to expand our program throughout the nation.

In the 13 states we currently support, people can visit our website to learn if they qualify, when to apply for a tax assistance program, and get in touch with a Property Tax-Aide volunteer who can help them prepare to apply.

Those who live in a state not currently supported by Property Tax-Aide can still use our website to find a link to their state's tax relief programs and apply for relief themselves.

Every state has its own eligibility requirements. Property Tax-Aide volunteers typically need to verify eligibility by asking applicants to provide a personal ID and other forms of verification specified by the state's tax relief program before helping them submit a tax application.

Rest assured, all personal information will remain secure and confidential.

To learn more about Property Tax-Aide in your state and to see if you might be eligible to participate, visit the Property Tax-Aide website aarpfoundation.org/propertytaxaide