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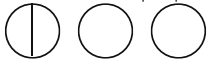
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LOCAL // HEALTH

'Moving with the times': Employers debate tracking COVID vaccination status, flexible schedules



Gwendolyn Wu, Staff writer
June 3, 2021 | Updated: June 4, 2021 9:10 a.m.





— People wait in line at Leaf & Grain at the food court in One Allen Center, 500 Dallas St., on the tunnel level Thursday, April 8, 2021 in Houston. Business is starting to pick up downtown as offices begin a gradual return to in-person work amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

On the verge of returning to workplaces and resuming normal life, Houston employers say the lessons they've learned about public health and meeting their employees' needs are reshaping the future of work.

Most employers are now planning to bring workers back into the office, or already have, experts said at a Thursday webinar hosted by the Houston Business Coalition on Health, an association of employers purchasing health plans. Some public health measures from the pandemic will remain, such as self-quarantine if exposed to COVID-19, increased workplace cleanings and contact tracing.

"The workforce is changing permanently," said Chris Skisak, executive director of the Houston Business Coalition on Health.

Of the 13 employers surveyed by the coalition, representing an average of 44,000 Houston employees each, 31 percent said they would track their employees' vaccination statuses. More than half — 53 percent — said they are moving toward

hybrid schedules, which alternate in-person work days to reduce exposure to COVID-19.

On [HoustonChronicle.com](https://www.houstonchronicle.com): [1 in 3 Texans are now fully vaccinated against COVID](#)

Some workplaces offered [on-site COVID testing](#) and vaccinations, but none of the companies surveyed required the vaccine as a condition of returning to the office.

For instance, [oil major BP](#) is not [requiring employees](#) to receive a vaccination.

However, those who aren't vaccinated may be limited in what they can do and could be required to wear masks on-site, said Johnathan Markert, a health and welfare benefits manager at BP.

BP's human resources team has also moved to a more flexible work schedule, requiring 60 percent of employees' work to be in-office and allowing the remaining time to be spent working from home. The option to work remotely depends on a person's job and division, but it's necessary to [accommodate employees' expectations](#).

"We were not a remote company whatsoever before COVID," Markert said. "We are moving with the times and that's something that will last."

Workplaces will have to account for unique developments in the vaccination effort, Skisak said. Possible booster shots, and pending litigation from a group of [Houston Methodist employees](#) who are suing the hospital for requiring a COVID-19 vaccine could shape which policies employers can institute as the world slowly returns to normal.

"I don't know if you'll be able to plan for some of this," Skisak said. "With return to work policies, they're all navigating their way through this day by day."

Benefits managers say they did not see a surge in health insurance claims during the pandemic, and COVID-19 infection claims have not been a "major factor" for them.

People who have delayed elective care such as knee surgeries and mammograms as a result of stay-at-home orders are now returning, and executives worry people have

neglected their physical and mental health to the point that their symptoms will be worse and care will be more expensive.

"This is one of the lasting legacies of this disease and it brought up why it's important for employers to focus on this," Skisak said.

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Gwendolyn Wu is the writer of The Chronicle's flagship newsletter, Bay Briefing, and an engagement reporter. As a Hearst Fellow, Gwendolyn previously worked as a business reporter at the Houston Chronicle, focusing on the health care and biotech sectors, and a metro reporter for The San Francisco Chronicle, where she was part of the award-winning breaking news team that covered the deadly Camp Fire.

Originally from the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, Gwendolyn graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with degrees in history and sociology. Follow her on Twitter @gwendolynawu.

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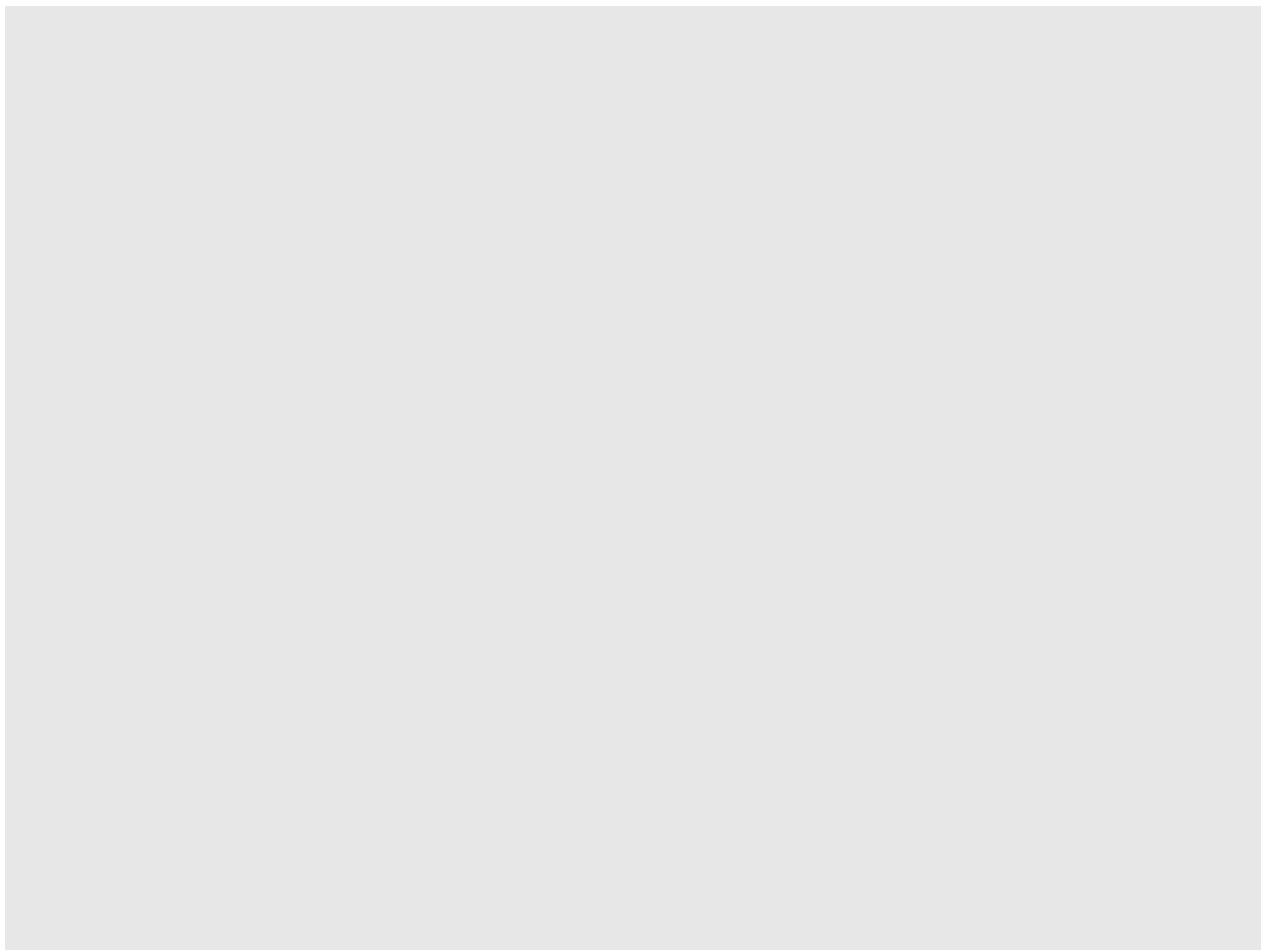
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As a result, rents have spiked and investors have begun snapping up apartment complexes at historically high rates — a dynamic that economic forecasters believe will persist into next year.

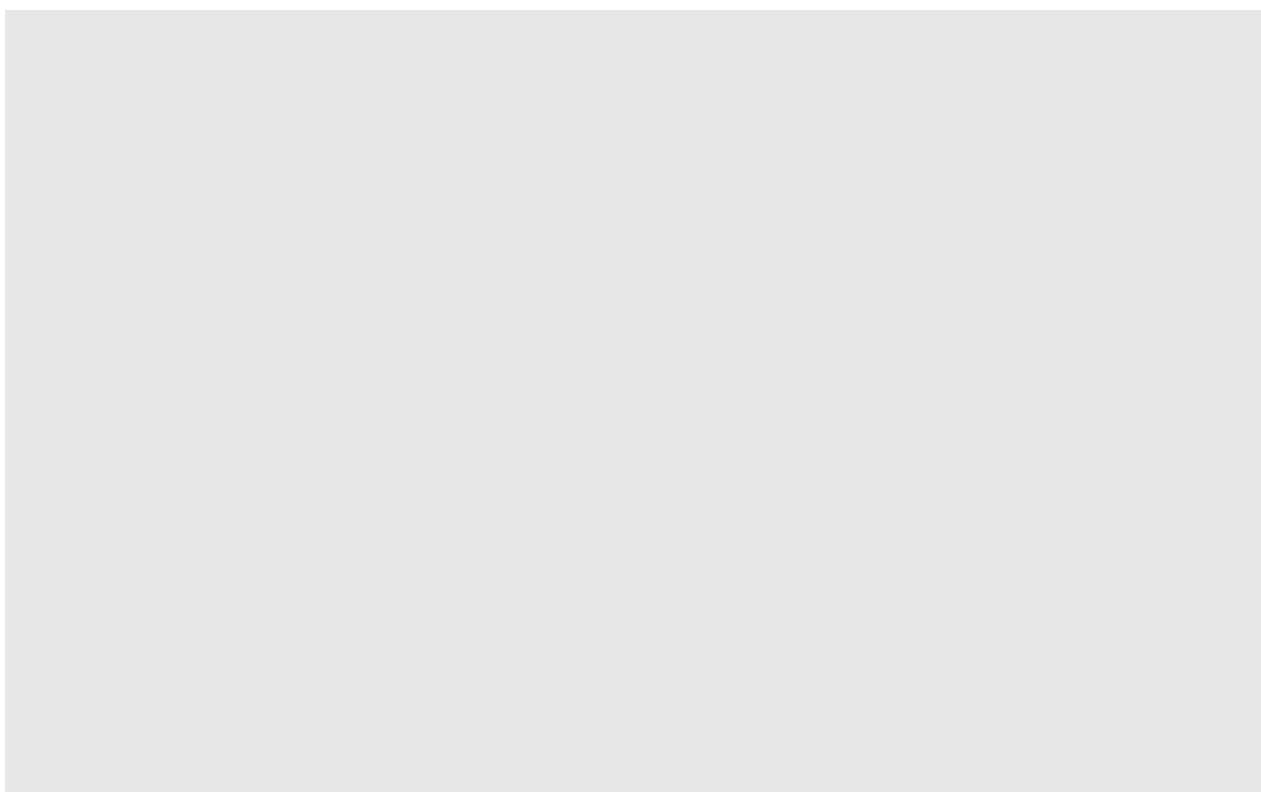
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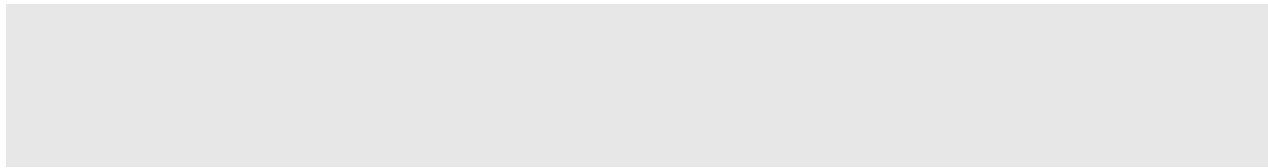
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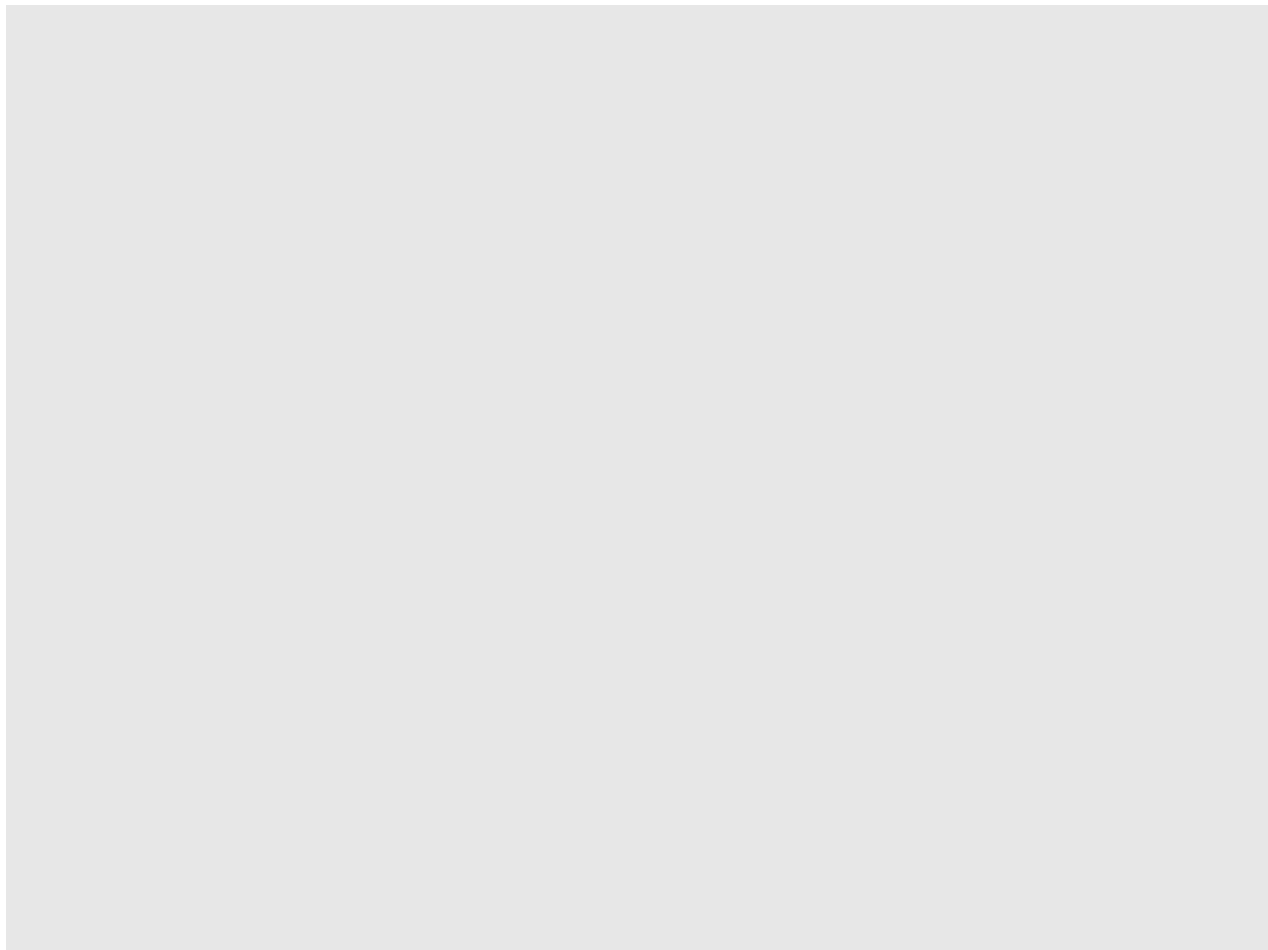


These Texas church homes don't qualify for tax break, but you pay

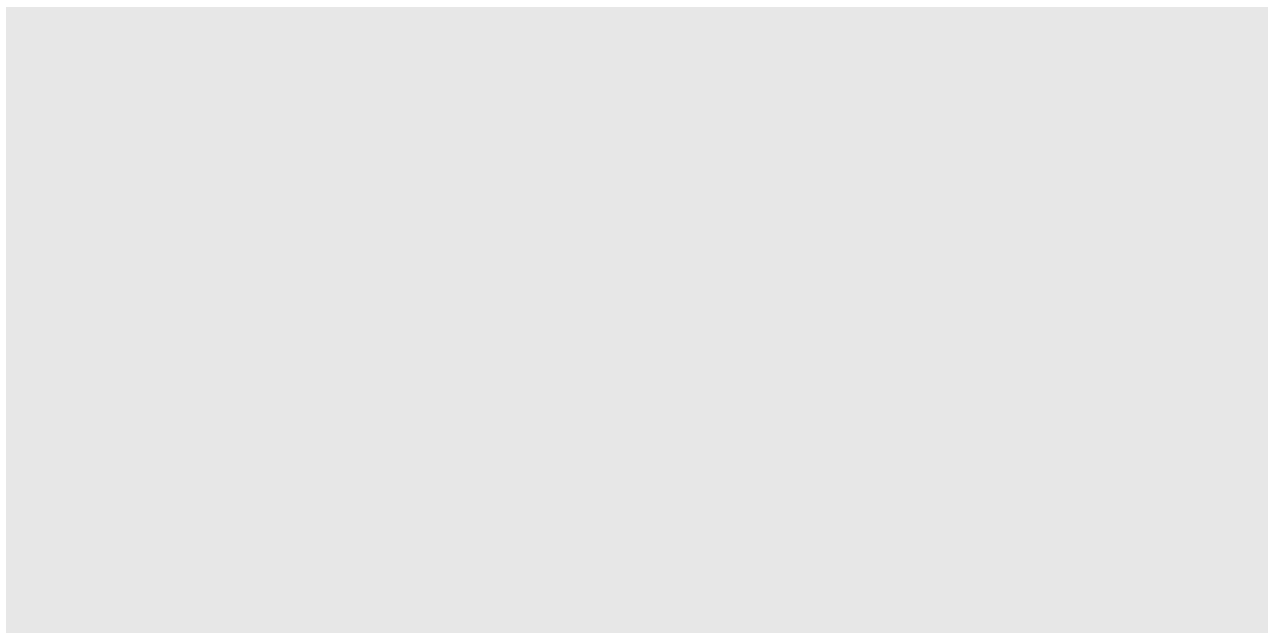


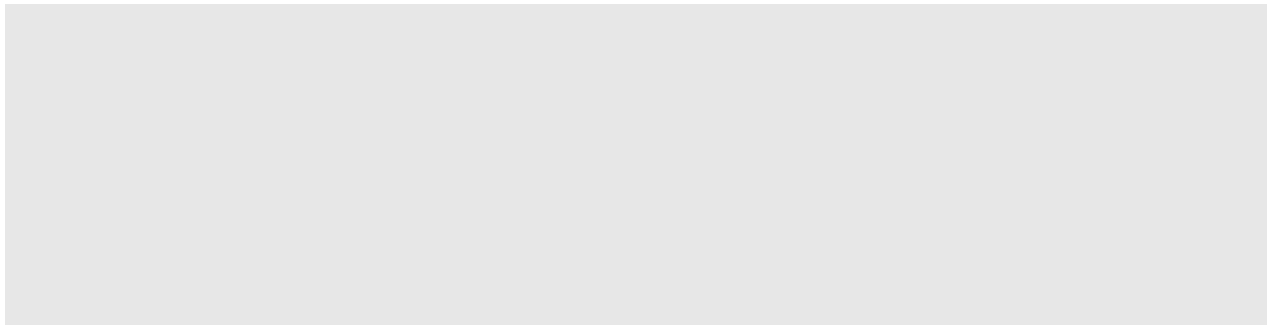


This wealthy Dallas church owns the most clergy homes in Texas

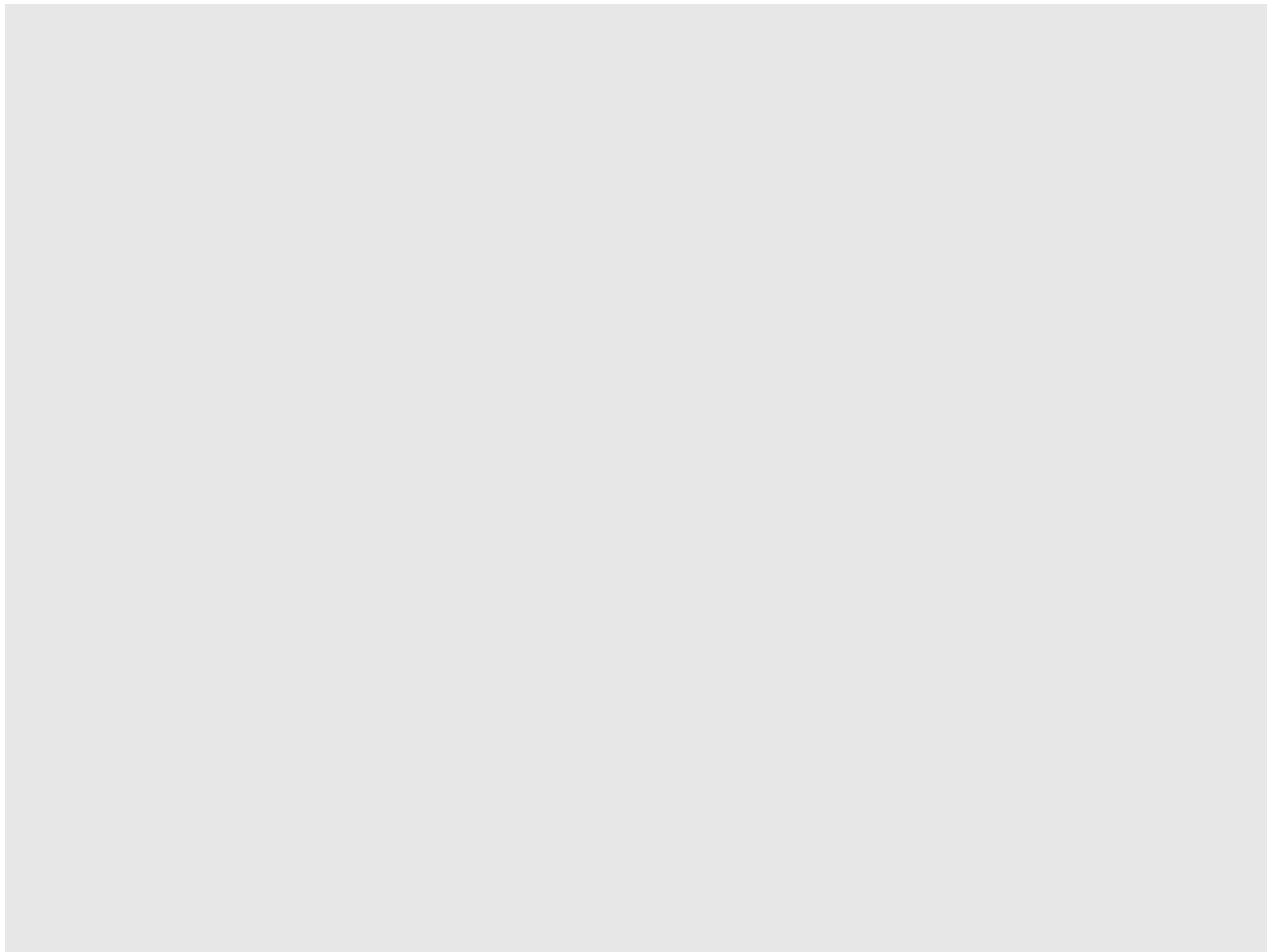


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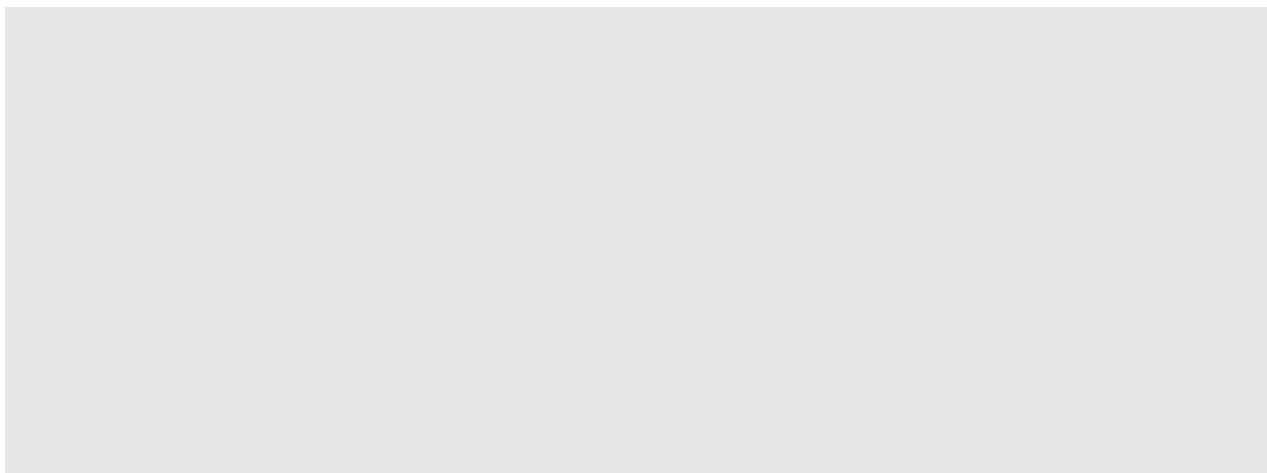


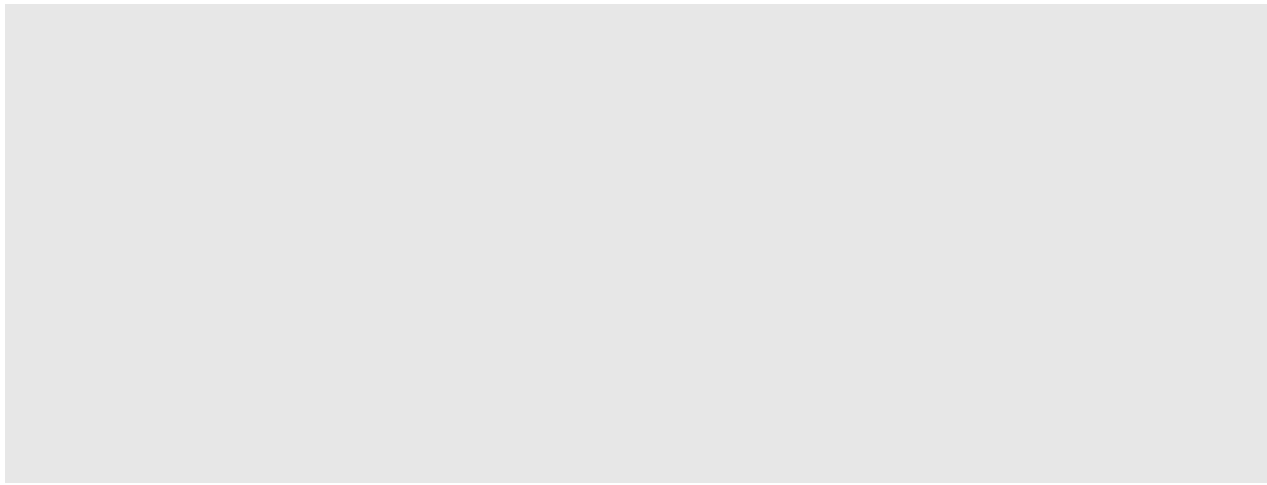


How Texas could close loopholes, save taxpayers thousands

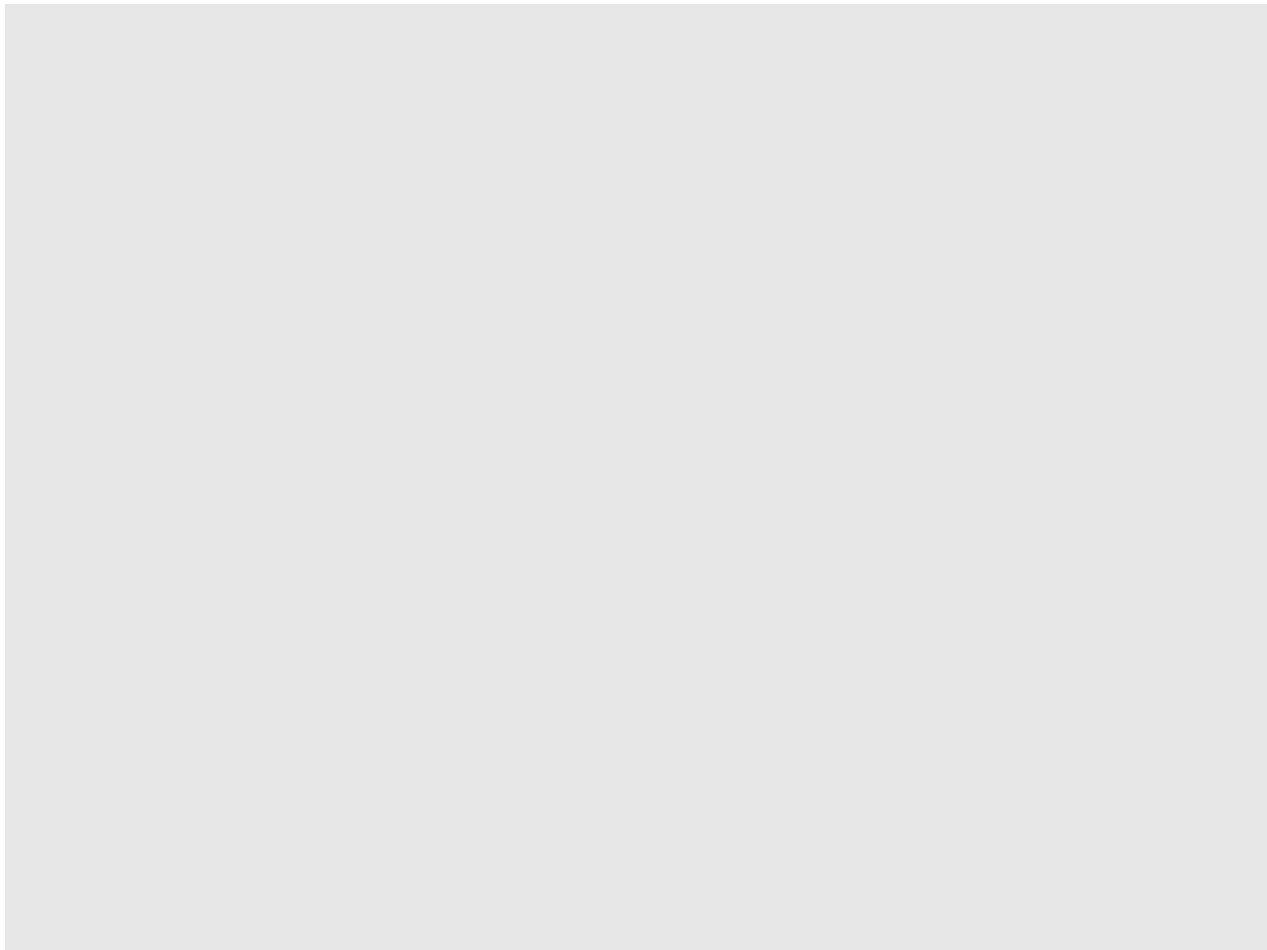


Map: Tax-free clergy homes across Texas and how much they cost





Interactive: How we reported the story



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