

ARTICLE

APRIL 27, 2020

 PREMIUM CONTENT FOR SUBSCRIBERS. SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Community Groups Step Up to Meet New Needs, Despite Their Own Financial Challenges

By Jim Rendon



DC DREAM CENTER

When Covid-19 became a threat in Washington, D.C., the DC Dream Center transformed itself from providing mentoring and other services to providing food to the community.

When a mysterious new coronavirus was ravaging parts of China in January, Ernest Clover, executive director of the DC Dream Center, heard from missionaries he knew there about how serious and fast-spreading it was. Long before the rush here, he began collecting masks and gloves that could be used at his nonprofit, which provides mentoring for young people, exercise classes for adults, and a host of other community services in Southeast D.C.

He knew that if the virus spread here, it would have a profound impact on his community. "We serve a very marginalized region under the best of circumstances," he says. Residents have very little, if anything, to fall back on if they lose their jobs and the economy contracts. Many are

undocumented immigrants who receive few government services. "We needed to pivot to make sure that we're here to cushion that blow," he says. "A lot of people here are working poor. Now they're just poor."

In March, when businesses began closing their doors, the center transformed itself. It stopped all of its mentoring programs. Instead, it began providing food to the community. It was not an easy shift. The group has a commercial kitchen in one of its buildings but no experience providing hundreds of

meals a day.

Clover asked a food-truck owner he knows if she wanted to become the organization's chef. Two hotels donated food, as did a food bank. The group has also worked with chef José Andrés's World Central Kitchen.

Since late March, the DC Dream Center has been providing more than 200 meals a day.

A GoFundMe campaign organized by a local resident allowed the group to buy additional meals from local restaurants to distribute to people who need them. By late April, the effort has raised \$31,000 to buy and deliver 50 meals a day. . It has taken some of the pressure off the group's kitchen while getting more meals to the community and helping local businesses.

Because he put stock in early warnings from China and acted quickly, he is meeting his community's need for food now, but he says the future is unknown. "I am just stepping out in faith with the information I have now, and this is what I believe is what we should be doing," he says. "I am not the Wizard of Oz."

Because of the Covid-19 crisis, social-distancing measures, and the deep economic contractions that have accompanied the pandemic, many nonprofits are finding that they either can't do their usual work or that new and more urgent needs demand their attention.

Like the DC Dream Center, community groups across the country are pivoting rapidly. They're developing new programs, closing down old ones, and sometimes completely changing the work they do in a matter of weeks or days to address the pressing needs around them. In many cases, they're stepping up in spite of the daunting financial challenges they face.

It's no surprise that nonprofits are making these kinds of profound shifts, says Greg Witkowski, a senior lecturer in nonprofit management at Columbia University. Many groups are closely connected to their communities, and often their missions tie them to marginalized people who are most impacted by a crisis like this.

"Nonprofits don't have to answer to shareholders if they need to pivot and provide for immediate needs," he says. "Generally speaking, there is more support for that because they are within the community, know the community, and engage with the community."

Filling Medical Gaps

Some groups are moving quickly to address the pandemic directly. Shortages of tests have left public-health experts guessing at the true scope of the infection rate. The Partnership for Clean Competition, a group that funds anti-doping research and is backed by the U.S. Olympic Committee and major U.S. sports leagues, saw a clear opportunity to help.

One of the testing labs the group funds came to it with an idea: a study that would test 15,000 asymptomatic people to learn more about who is and who isn't infected with the virus. Understanding the infection rate among people who show no symptoms could help inform decisions about when and how to loosen restrictions on daily life.

"People are stepping up in tremendous ways. And this is what we thought we could do to step up," says Michael Pearlmutter the group's executive director. "We provide scientific research, so we thought that was the way we could contribute."

The group purchased testing kits for the lab that came up with the idea at a cost of \$120,000. The kits test for antibodies so results will show whether individuals have ever had the virus. In partnership with two universities and several public-health departments, people in 24 cities have been tested and received results. Preliminary results from two counties show surprisingly high rates of infection. A summary of the full results will be published later this week, and the study will be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Pearlmutter says the group, which is used to acting quickly on funding requests — sometimes within 48 hours — was well positioned to respond in the crisis. "We really pride ourselves on being nimble," he says. "We were set up for this and had the right strategic partners. I think that is why we felt so compelled to help in this way."

The Goodwill of Colorado also found a medical need it could fill. The group had some experience taking on new roles during emergencies. During Colorado's fires in 2012 and 2013, the organization became the central repository for donated goods. The group then gave vouchers to residents displaced by the fire so they could shop in its stores. At the same time, it freed up space in its commercial laundry facility to wash all the sheets and blankets from Red Cross shelters.

"That was something new and different for us," says Karla Grazier, the group's CEO. "We took the resources we have and combined them in new ways to strategically fill the gaps that appear in crises."

In late March, the group was facing a crisis of its own. The state's order to shutter all nonessential businesses forced it to close its 43 stores. It was in the midst of that shutdown and furloughing 1,900 of its 3,000 employees when it got a call from the Colorado Visiting Nurse Association. The group needed personal protective equipment. At the same time, Grazier was meeting with others in her group to think about what it could do to respond to the crisis. She thought the group might have scrubs in its inventory that could be helpful — and now it had an organization that was happy to take them off its hands.

"It really was a confluence of us thinking and being ready and then somebody else reaching out and saying, 'Hey, we'd love those,' " she says.



DC DREAM CENTER

Ernest Clover, DC Dream Center executive director, got word early on from missionaries he knew in China about the fast-spreading coronavirus, so he got masks and gloves for his nonprofit long before the rush.

While it might seem like a simple task to gather up and deliver scrubs, Grazier says it took coordination across many parts of the organization. Staff who were about to be furloughed had to search not only what was on the racks of its stores but also what it had in the donation pipeline. The garments had to be picked up from 43 locations and taken to its commercial laundry facility. Then the facility had to make room for 450 sets of scrubs to be cleaned and organized by size and sent along to the nurses' group.

"For our frontline employees, they were pretty excited," Grazier says. "You get to step up and do something for a group of people who are really putting themselves at risk, our health-care

workers. They have pride in the mission."

But there were also real costs to this effort: the staff time, the trucks to pick up and deliver the scrubs, making room in the schedule of its laundry facility. But, she says, they couldn't let cost be a driving consideration even though it happened at a time of financial stress for the group.

"If we had done that, we probably would've made a different decision because everyone is hurting financially," she says. "It was almost like we had to do this, regardless."

'These Are Not Normal Times'

Covid-19 and the financial freefall it touched off has given rise to so many overwhelming needs. It can be hard for groups to determine which needs fall within their mission and which ones don't — or even whether the old ways of seeing things still make sense.

"In normal times, if you're a mentoring program, what the heck are you doing delivering food to people? That's somebody else's mission," says David La Piana, managing partner at La Piana Consulting. "But these are not normal times." Nonetheless, he says, groups should consider their mission when trying to meet new and immediate needs. "I think the mission has to be part of the core. Otherwise, you are just flailing around," he says.

Before the crisis, Room in the Inn-Memphis broadened its mission, which in part helped it fill an often-overlooked need during this crisis. It usually helps place homeless people in church-run shelters in Memphis. But during the crisis, with social-distancing measures in place, Anderson says

it became clear that it would be very hard to maintain those practices in church shelters and it would no longer be safe for clients or volunteers so it stopped placing people in churches., and other shelters were not accepting many new people.

Shutting down was not an option, says the group's executive director, Lisa Anderson. "We have a mission, and we feel like we should find ways to continue that mission, which is sheltering those experiencing homelessness and doing that with hospitality and safety."

Even before the crisis, Anderson had wanted to expand the group's work to include providing care for homeless people who had been discharged from the hospital and needed a place to live while recovering. Now they were even more vulnerable. They would have trouble finding shelter and would be at great risk to contract Covid-19.

Anderson's group worked with local hospitals and reached out to hotels she had worked with in the past when, for example, a family needed temporary shelter. She was able to coordinate and secure beds in those hotels for people being released from the hospital. Anderson knew they needed more than just a room. Her volunteers began putting together and delivering meals to the people in the hotels. The group is also buying meals from local restaurants.

All of this has had a large impact on the group's finances. Room in the Inn is a tiny organization with just four employees. In the past, it primarily placed people in shelters; it didn't pay for those beds. And while it had previously provided some meals, it wasn't making and delivering three a day.



GOODWILL OF COLORADO

After Goodwill of Colorado had to shut down its traditional services because it was considered a nonessential business, it started providing scrubs to the Colorado Visiting Nurse Association.

The organization has received an emergency grant from a community foundation and lots of volunteer help. "We'll just do it until we can't," Anderson says.

The organization was able to quickly respond in part because of the work the board had done to refine and clarify the group's mission before this crisis. She says the mission — sheltering people who are experiencing homelessness — was both clear and open-ended enough to allow the group to adapt. It helped her to see that these people fit within the group's mission and that their needs were important to address.

"We used work that we had already done to define who we were and what we wanted to be as an organization and stayed focused on the needs of

the guests that we were serving," she says. "When their needs shifted, we needed to shift what we were doing and how we were doing it."

Nimble by Necessity

Not all groups have been able to hew so closely to their missions. Some are helping new groups of people or aiding those they already serve in very different ways as their circumstances have changed. The chronic underfunding of human-service nonprofits and others causes deep problems, but in this instance, the skills the groups have gained struggling to do good on meager budgets have helped them be more nimble and effective in this shifting crisis, says Columbia University professor Witkowski.

"The community-focused organizations, they're used to working with fewer funds and solving problems with fewer resources," he says. "They have to be adaptable."

Like many nonprofits, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Monterey County, in California, had to close its doors due to government-mandated shutdowns. The group's after-school learning, fitness, arts, and science programs for young people all took place in its two buildings. The group usually provides the children it serves with about 500 meals a day. With school closed, it was concerned about where those young people were getting their meals.

Initially, the group bought food from a local food bank to give away. Then it partnered with the local school district and the City of Marina to give away bags of groceries in a school parking lot. The school site is across the street from a low-income housing development. The first day about 700 people lined up for groceries.

It is also putting together meals for some of the people in its programs that it distributes at its clubhouse. Families usually pull up in cars to get the meals. Employees wearing masks and gloves place the meals in the car for them.

"They just want to go give [the kids] a hug, but they can't," says Ron Johnson, the organization's CEO. "All they can do is wave. They can't even really smile at them because they are wearing a mask."

He says the group has been able to reach many new people with its food program. Even though the service is different, it is still helping the community. "Your best thinking comes out in crisis," he says.

Some groups have stepped up by doing everything they can to meet the basic needs of the clients they already serve.

In Oakland, Fresh Lifelines for Youth — or FLY — works with young people to prevent juvenile crime and incarceration. It serves roughly 2,500 teenagers a year in three Bay Area counties. Like the Boys & Girls Clubs, it had to call off its in-person work — mentoring and coaching programs often happen in the community or in a young person's home. It could no longer go into juvenile detention facilities to meet with the youths. But it quickly became clear that the economic crisis was severely affecting the young people in its programs.

FLY started small, reaching out to clients by text or phone call to find out what they needed and to tell them about social distancing and how to be safe when shopping or going out.

Employees learned that some young people could not order food because they lacked a credit card or a smartphone. Staff ordered food for them. One employee even went to a store and purchased toilet paper for one of the teenagers and left it at the door.

The organization has been getting routers and smartphones to young people to improve their connectivity, and it has been informing them and their families about changes in rental laws and new benefits through social media and other platforms. The group is doing distance learning with some youths in one juvenile detention facility where the kids have access to Chromebooks.

"It's been an opportunity to reimagine how we might support young people and their families," says Ali Knight, Fly's chief operating officer.

Working with people in prison has been particularly challenging, says Kathie Klarreich, executive director of Exchange for Change. By mid-March she knew that her work would likely soon come to a halt. Her small organization teaches writing to inmates in two state correctional institutions and a federal one in South Florida. As soon as the department of corrections halted visitation privileges, she knew her group's ability to enter the prisons would be denied soon. She told her students she didn't know when she would see them again.

Klarreich met with a coalition of other groups that provide services in Florida prisons to discuss what they could do for the inmates. She says that it was quickly clear that health and safety were the top priorities. Inmates received only one small, hotel-size bar of soap a week. They are not allowed to have hand sanitizer because it contains alcohol. Keeping their hands clean in such close quarters was clearly a challenge.

The coalition started a GoFundMe campaign to purchase soap for inmates and hand sanitizer for the guards. The \$11,000 drive raised enough to buy 10,000 bars of soap and 50 gallons of hand sanitizer. The supplies are being delivered to eight prisons. There are about 95,000 inmates in the Florida prison system — far more than they can help now — but, she says, it is a start.

As groups struggle to meet new and shifting needs during the pandemic, it is important to remember that times of crisis are often the catalyst for new and bold ideas when groups find even better ways to fulfill their missions, says La Piana, the consultant.

"We are going to look back on this era and say, 'Wow, that's when that organization really went to scale or that's when they really took off or that is when that new organization was founded,'" he says. "There are always, in every crisis, people who saw an opportunity and went for it."

© 2020 The Chronicle of Philanthropy

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037