

The Columbus Dispatch

Opinion

Crisis burdens charities as need for services grows

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What good will come from the current pandemic? It's a question many of us are asking ourselves as we contemplate how our world will function in the future. We are certainly still in the thick of the effort to keep everyone safe and it's a little hard to imagine any long-term good coming from so much dislocation and loss.

But the tremendous efforts being made by our local nonprofit community in the past weeks give me hope that when we eventually emerge into a new normal, our shared experiences will help us serve our most vulnerable residents with even more care and expertise.

One principle that has been reinforced for me is the importance of cooperation and communication among our nonprofit, business and government organizations. The strong and longstanding collaborative relationships between these groups have been strengthened even further during the pandemic. Leaders have held virtual meetings since the beginning of the crisis to share information and coordinate much-needed funding.

Fundraising efforts specifically to support nonprofits responding to the pandemic were developed and launched quickly and grant-making has taken place at a rapid pace. For example, the United Way COVID-19 Community Response Fund has raised almost \$2 million since its first day on March 16 and quickly granted \$1.24 million of that total.

The explosion of needs demanded a flexible and nimble response and with the steadfast support of our corporate and government partners and generous individual donors, we were able to rise to the occasion and help meet them. I have been working in our nonprofit community for decades and I have never

witnessed the kind of rapid and coordinated response to community needs that has taken place since the middle of March. This experience will have a significant impact on the way everyone in our sector works in the future.

And it will have to, because the status quo is gone. While the nonprofit and funder community has rallied to meet the current need, the longer-term picture is very troubling. Research conducted by United Way of Central Ohio, The Human Service Chamber of Franklin County and Illuminology found that local nonprofits already have lost more than \$8 million from canceled fundraising events alone.



Only 20% of programs are operating as they did before the pandemic. Hundreds of nonprofit employees have been laid off or furloughed. Local nonprofits have sustained a heavy financial blow and it will take months and sometimes years to recover.

And every day we read in the pages of The Dispatch about how communities of color are particularly at risk from COVID-19 due to health and economic disparities that have persisted for decades. Our United Way has focused on

addressing these disparities for many, many years and in this time of crisis we are thankful for trusted nonprofit partners like The Columbus Urban League that have been stepping up to meet the increased needs of vulnerable people of color.

As we emerge from the pandemic, our community will need to maintain the high level of cooperation we are currently experiencing to address not only issues caused by the pandemic but underlying issues of inequality in economic opportunities and education that have kept so many of our residents from reaching their potential. We will have to continue and expand investments not only in crucial basic needs but in extending the benefits of high-quality education to all the children who have had their learning journeys disrupted.

Though we have many months of struggle ahead of us, I am hopeful that together we can create the progress and renewal our community needs to weather this dark time and build a stronger, more equal central Ohio.

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