

The Columbus Dispatch

NEWS

City Council puts \$1.21 million toward COVID paycheck program for low-wage workers

Bill Bush The Columbus Dispatch

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Columbus City Council on Monday allocated \$1.21 million in federal aid toward providing low-wage workers cash assistance so that they can take time off to recover from COVID-19.

The council also approved an \$80,000, no-bid contract with criminologist David M. Kennedy, a professor of criminal justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City who specializes in crime prevention among inner-city gangs and is the director of the college's National Network for Safe Communities. Kennedy is being hired to help implement a comprehensive group-violence intervention strategy in Columbus.

The \$1.21 million in federal CARES Act money that council allocated will go to provide financial help to people living paycheck-to-paycheck who contract coronavirus so they can take time off to isolate. The "Right to Recover" program, which will be administered through the Columbus Urban League and Catholic Social Services, mirrors one started in San Francisco in late May.

Many workers in low-wage jobs don't get sick pay in Ohio, and — unlike many higher-pay employees — have to show up to jobs in person rather than work from home.

Michael Fielding, assistant health commissioner for Columbus, said low-income neighborhoods are showing a disparity of COVID-related health issues, including higher infection rates, hospitalizations and deaths, than higher-income areas.

For example, Fielding said that a group of city neighborhoods, including Linden, the Hilltop, Franklinton and the Near East Side, have a rate of COVID hospitalizations more than double that in higher-income areas: 256 cases per 100,000 residents vs. 125 cases per 100,000, respectively.

"On the one hand, showing up in person (to jobs) exposes them and their families to increased risk of infection. But not showing up at all means they can no longer meet a rent payment, doctor's bill, or the cost of their child's medicine," said Councilwoman Elizabeth Brown, who sponsored the ordinance.

The program will provide payments equal to up to 40 hours per week for two weeks at a maximum of \$15 per hour for those who qualify before Dec. 31, 2020, up to a total of \$1,200. Eligible residents must either personally have tested positive for COVID-19 and earn at or below 150% of the federal poverty line, which for a family of four is \$39,300 annually.

The crime-intervention program with Kennedy will focus on those groups most at-risk of being a victim or offender of violent crime, "with the intention to keep them alive, safe, and out of prison," according to the ordinance.

Violent crime and gunfire have exploded in Columbus this year, with homicides on a pace to set a new annual record. The issue is the focus of a four-part series currently running in The Dispatch through Wednesday.

Read the series: Under fire: Behind the increase in violence in Columbus

The program will cover at least six months of consultation to provide "group mapping" of crime data, in conjunction with the Columbus Division of Police's gang and homicide units, said Deputy Safety Director George Speaks.

"It will show where are the folks who are committing violent crimes, what are those groups, what are the connections, who are the leaders in that group, and that is where law enforcement and social service agencies can then dedicate their precious resources," Speaks said. "...Studies have shown that a few people drive the great majority of violence. This gets at those few people."

Dr. Jonathan Groner, a professor of surgery at Ohio State University College of Medicine and trauma medical director at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, said that since the pandemic occurred in March, there has been a surge in young people, including children, being shot.

More police and arrests won't help, so the city needs a new approach like the Kennedy-led program, that focuses on deterrence and building up police legitimacy, he said.

In other action, the council approved paying \$267,750 to the Ohio Expositions Commission to rent space at the State Fairgrounds between Oct. 1 and Dec. 30 to conduct COVID testing.

The action approves an expenditure approved by Mayor Andrew J. Ginther under his emergency powers he exercised earlier this year as the coronavirus hit the city.

COVID-19 testing is being expanded from Columbus Public Health headquarters east of Downtown to the Fairgrounds as part of a partnership with the Columbus area's three hospital systems: OhioHealth, Ohio State University, and Mount Carmel.

A letter attached to the ordinance shows that Ginther also used his emergency powers in August to pay Ohio State \$1.3 million for testing and contact tracing, to pay the Expo Center up to \$400,000 for rental space, and to pay two other organizations \$224,000 for COVID-related expenditures. Under emergency powers, the mayor doesn't need council approval.

The city council accepted a \$125,000 grant from Franklin County to support the Franklin County Overdose Data to Action Project, a three-year, \$11.7 million federally funded, effort to gather and use data to provide interventions and education to vulnerable overdose populations in Columbus, and also conduct public-awareness marketing in targeted neighborhoods.

Though often overshadowed by COVID, overdose deaths remain comparable to those caused by coronavirus in Franklin County, with about 64 fatal overdoses per month in the first quarter of 2020. That's about 70% of the monthly COVID death count for the county since March, when the first of 635 COVID deaths began occurring.

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