

CommUnity Conversations

Community Centers and Basic Needs Organizations

April 16th, 2020

This event was the second in a series of virtual conversations bringing together nonprofit organizations and their allies to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 on their work. Eighteen professionals from various parts of Wisconsin were in attendance. The most pressing issues for attendees were meeting new needs for support and shifting existing programming.

Emerging Community Needs

As safety net providers, community centers and basic needs organizations are at the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis. Providers report that the epidemic is worsening existing community challenges like lack of food access, health disparities, and financial instability. These issues disproportionately impact groups who are already marginalized based on race, class, or documentation.

Adapting to COVID-19

COVID-19 has disrupted business as usual, but nonprofits providing essential services are finding creative new ways to work. Food pantries rapidly implemented new protocols to ensure client and staff safety. Community groups are rallying to support immigrant families with food and financial support, since they are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and less able to access relief funds. However, organizations are finding it more difficult to reach populations like the young and the elderly. Nonessential programming is on hold, leaving some organizations to weather out the storm.

Mutual aid networks around the state have also mobilized timely responses to community needs. The grassroots organizing methods these groups use could inform the evolving COVID-19 responses of basic needs organizations.

At the same time, basic needs organizations could offer a perspective on more systematic protections for vulnerable populations – something that could be a challenge for mutual aid responses.

Sustainability and Next Steps

Organizations are also facing major disruption to their long-term strategic plans. For one, providers express uncertainty about program sustainability and funding in the long run. COVID-19 also highlighted the need for emergency and crisis communication plans. Umbrella organizations, like United Way, can be thought partners in this by helping nonprofits to think strategically about what lies ahead after the immediate response is over.

Call for Action from the Field

- Partnership with mutual aid groups, or incorporating mutual aid approaches, could help match community needs and assets.
- Nonprofits and funders have to work closely and communicate to ensure program sustainability.
- Cross-organizational partnerships can be a place to share innovative practices and long-term community responses.



Extension

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