

A CARING, CONNECTED COMMUNITY

How Greater Des Moines
nonprofits met our needs
during the pandemic.

MARCH 2020 - OCTOBER 2021
COMMISSIONED BY
THE DISASTER RECOVERY FUND

DEAR GREATER DES MOINES COMMUNITY,

The COVID-19 pandemic shook all of us in tremendous ways. Our health, our safety, our loved ones, our ability to provide for our families, our time together in community—these essential anchors of our well-being were all threatened. Many of us had the resources and good fortune to weather a storm of such proportions. Others did not. Clear disparities and social unrest forced us to acknowledge that many people in our community, especially those who have been historically marginalized, encounter injustice and inequity in their daily lives.

The nonprofit sector was quick to call out the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on specific neighbors. Staff and volunteers witnessed community members falling ill, fearing for their lives, caring for loved ones, losing jobs, struggling to navigate complex systems, and seeking help for food and housing. Nonprofit staff leaped into action to support our neighbors experiencing these simultaneous crises.

Back in 2018, our community formed the Disaster Recovery Fund to support nonprofits during times of disaster and to reduce economic and health impacts on vulnerable populations. We never imagined we would see such a wide-ranging and long-lasting disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic. **Yet, in our time of greatest need, we witnessed the power of relationships, the resilience of our residents, and our community’s commitment to thrive.**

This report is the story of what our nonprofit community in Greater Des Moines accomplished, with the support of the Disaster Recovery Fund. It’s a story of compassion, exhausting work, innovation, and true collaboration. It demonstrates the resourcefulness, flexibility, strategic thinking, and tireless dedication of the nonprofit staff who serve those in need. Above all, it embodies the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to thrive. We all grow stronger when every individual is treated as a valuable member of our community.

We’re proud that the nonprofit sector was able to meet the needs of our community in a time of crisis. We must also recognize the pandemic is still here and people continue to suffer from its effects and will do so for years. Now is the time to double down on our commitment to having difficult conversations, providing flexible and significant funding, cherishing the expertise and work of nonprofits, and advocating for systemic changes to address the root causes of our biggest challenges.

In this report, we share the history of what happened when the pandemic hit our community in early 2020 and examples of how the nonprofit sector responded through summer 2021. For every example cited in the following pages, there are a dozen more worth mentioning. While surges of COVID-19 cases continue and our community is still experiencing tremendous stress, we hope the lessons of the past 18 months help us move toward a brighter and more inclusive future. **Join us in imagining what a better normal can be.**

We are incredibly grateful for the generosity of our community. We appreciate the many leaders who rose to meet the challenges of this turbulent time and continue to do so. And we offer our heartfelt thanks to nonprofit staff and volunteers for their incredible dedication. Greater Des Moines is indebted to you.

Sincerely,

The Disaster Recovery Fund COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee

- **Sarah Boese**, Polk County Board of Supervisors
- **Angela Dethlefs-Trettin**, Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines
- **Renée Miller**, United Way of Central Iowa
- **Suzanne Mineck**, Mid-Iowa Health Foundation
- **Kris Schechinger-Camper**, Nationwide Foundation

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IMPACT IN THE COMMUNITY

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, our community stepped up in incredible ways to provide support to individuals facing significant challenges. Through public and private funding, including Disaster Recovery Fund grants, nonprofit organizations reported these powerful examples of impact, which represent just a fraction of the countless ways nonprofits responded. Their important work continues today.

Examples of Innovation

Emergency food assistance programs

began delivering food to people's homes and partnering with nonprofits to distribute food in places where people access services.

Al Éxito launched a **community center for Latinx individuals** and others to access information and assistance.

Proteus, Inc. launched a **pilot program to provide primary health care services in meat-processing plants**, building on its successful program for migrant farmworkers.

Genesis Youth Foundation hosted **community conversations among African leaders** to build collaboration to elevate the contributions and needs of African residents.

The Justice Center Project expanded to other courthouses in the state to **prevent evictions just as they are heading to court**, serving as a last-step safety net for families about to lose their homes.

Training champions from diverse communities to share vaccination information created a **model for how health care outreach can become more culturally competent and intentionally build trust** within communities.

Meeting community needs

138,849 calls and texts were made to United Way of Central Iowa's 211 helpline in 2020.

2.9 million pounds of food were distributed through Eat Greater Des Moines' Operation: Fresh Produce Drop program.

4,000 Iowans received financial assistance through the Central Iowa Immigrant Community Support Fund created to support the Latinx community.

2,400 people heading to court from Sept. 2020-Feb. 2021 received financial help to prevent evictions through the Justice Center Project, a collaboration among many central Iowa partners.

2,700 hours were spent by **25 trainers** educating diverse communities about the COVID-19 vaccine in a way that addressed cultural and religious concerns, increasing vaccination rates within those communities.

700 volunteer hours through the Abyei Ngok Community Association in the U.S. went toward helping **173 families** navigate unique challenges in 2020.

3,000 calls in 10 languages and 25 dialects were received through EMBARC Helpline and Virtual Access Center from March-early Sept. 2020.

250 students were supported through Genesis Youth Foundation's and Oakridge Neighborhood Services' out-of-school programs, which expanded to meet students' needs when schools went virtual.

\$40 million was distributed in rental assistance in Polk County from March 2020-October 2021 through several programs.

2.1 million pounds of food were distributed to Iowans through the Food Bank of Iowa in October 2020, a new record.

Challenges persist

While great progress was made during this time, challenges continue. We will need greater investment and continued dedication to tackle root causes. We must commit to addressing ongoing crises including the following:

Racism, discrimination, and systemic barriers continue to generate significant disparities for people of color.

Food pantries are seeing a record number of unique visitors as the volume of individuals using services for the first time has risen.

Eviction cases now make up half of Iowa Legal Aid's caseload, up from a quarter before the pandemic, and housing advocates continue to see a need to provide rental assistance with limited affordable housing options in the region.

Latinx families remain hidden because of harmful immigration policies and a fear of violence and deportation.

Hospital systems are overwhelmed by the rise in serious mental health issues and continued surges of COVID-19 cases.

Students have fallen behind in learning after long periods out of the classroom.

Most nonprofits are operating over capacity, and responding to the pandemic has taken a heavy toll on staff.

THE MOMENT OF CRISIS

Many remember the arrival of the pandemic as a slow build of concerning news updates that quickly flared into a crisis. When the first confirmed COVID-19 case was reported in Dallas County, the community and state launched an emergency response.

Renée Miller, Chief Community Impact Officer at United Way of Central Iowa, remembers receiving a call from state leaders asking the organization to mobilize 211 as a COVID-19 hotline. “You could almost hear fear in the voices of leaders as they identified that this is going to be an issue and a lot of people are going to be affected.”

Dawn Martinez Oropeza, Executive Director of Al Éxito, had taken Latinx youth on a trip to Minnesota to prepare for a presentation when meetings were cancelled one by one. Tray Wade, President and CEO of EveryStep, was about to leave for a trip abroad when, as a board member of the Dallas County Hospital, he received a call confirming the first COVID-19 case.

“So much was unknown then, and it dawned on me just how serious and really scary this was for local health care and human service providers who were trying to help people,” he said.

As people realized the magnitude of what was happening, nonprofit leaders faced difficult decisions involving their



Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines presentation to donors featured nonprofit leaders sharing their experiences from the pandemic.

own families, staff, and the people they served. While they needed to keep staff members safe, leaders also recognized many individuals in our community could only access services in person.

“We were pivoting quickly to make crucial decisions on how to be available for people in our neighborhood,” said Izaah Knox, Executive Director of Urban Dreams.

Many nonprofits transitioned staff to remote work but had to upgrade technology and systems to maintain services. Others decided to keep offices open and implemented safety measures

for staff and clients. The fear and anxiety among nonprofit staff mirrored feelings building across the community as people began to realize the pandemic wouldn’t end anytime soon.

Suzanne Mineck, President and CEO of Mid-Iowa Health Foundation, remembers suddenly going into hyper-communication mode. “It was exhausting. From dawn until dusk, non-stop virtual meetings took place as we were trying to learn from each other, support one another, and gather knowledge.”

“You couldn’t pause for a moment and had to keep going,” said Angela Dethlefs-Trettin, Chief Community Impact Officer at the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines. “We had to figure out what we could do that would have the biggest, most important impact in the lives of people. At the same time, we knew that we had such an amazing, trusting group of partners that we were going to figure it out. There was no doubt in my mind: We would figure it out.”



“It was exhausting. From dawn until dusk, non-stop virtual meetings took place as we were trying to learn from each other, support one another, and gather knowledge.”

Suzanne Mineck, Mid-Iowa Health Foundation

THE DISASTER RECOVERY FUND

After flash flooding in July 2018, community leaders recognized the need to put formal structures in place to respond to the next disaster. For about a year, system-focused stakeholders began mapping out guiding principles and processes to address the waves of short-term, mid-term, and long-term needs a typical crisis generates.

The Disaster Coordination Team, the group of stakeholders involved in imagining the community-wide, crisis-response structure, determined a community fund could provide an option for donors to help address immediate and long-term unmet needs that could arise during a disaster. The Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines established the fund and agreed to provide staff leadership and facilitation. Other organizations—including Polk County Emergency Management, The American Red Cross of Central Iowa Chapter, United Way

of Central Iowa, IMPACT, and Polk County—participated in conversations about how the fund would operate. Stakeholders were just determining these processes when COVID-19 hit.

“I cannot imagine doing it without that groundwork having taken place,” said Angela Dethlefs-Trettin of the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines.

The Disaster Coordination Team created and convened a Disaster Recovery Fund COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee. Philanthropic leaders with expertise in health and human services were called to serve on the grant committee. The team set the focus of the fund for this activation on reducing the economic and health impacts of vulnerable populations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Community Foundation and United Way provided

initial financial backing to open the fund, followed by support from Businessolver Foundation, Cultivating Compassion: The Dr. Richard Deming Foundation Fund, Mid-Iowa Health Foundation, and the Polk County Board of Supervisors.

Individuals and businesses could donate, with the assurance that their dollars would be used to respond to needs not covered by existing local, state, and federal resources and programs. Established focus areas for the fund included:

- **Resiliency:** Supporting frontline service providers, especially those providing disaster case management and immediate support to vulnerable populations.
- **Restoration:** Supplementing funding for the operations and programs of local service providers based on the disaster.

A Look Inside the Disaster Recovery Fund

PURPOSE

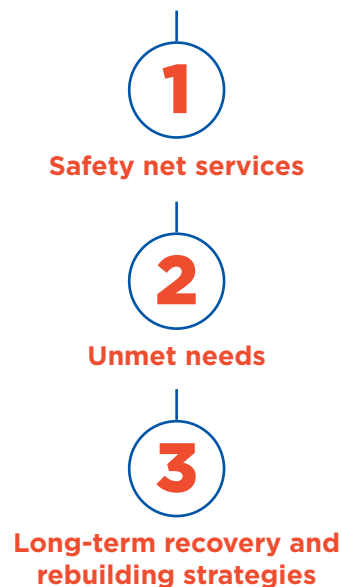
To provide investments focused on reducing the economic and health impacts on vulnerable populations prior to and following a disaster, as well as long-term needs that may emerge.

The fund accepts gifts from individuals, corporations, and funders to supplement, not replace, other resources, including government support and relief efforts in times of local disaster. Funding decisions will be informed by the community.

VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

For the COVID-19 disaster, the term “vulnerable populations” was defined as individuals who are likely to suffer disproportionately during the COVID-19 crisis because of pre-existing systemic, economic, social, and health barriers.

PHASES OF FUNDING



DISASTER RECOVERY FUND COVID-19 GRANTMAKING COMMITTEE

Sarah Boese
Polk County Board of Supervisors

Angela Dethlefs-Trettin
Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines

Renée Miller
United Way of Central Iowa

Suzanne Mineck
Mid-Iowa Health Foundation

Kris Schechinger-Camper
Nationwide Foundation

Committee Facilitator:
Mary Sellers

Key Decisions

The Disaster Recovery Fund's established structure allowed the Grantmaking Committee to mobilize quickly, but leaders still needed to map out guidelines for funding decisions. The committee spent time thinking about these important topics:

Short-term vs. long-term needs:

The committee relied on a framework that identified short-term and long-term phases of a disaster and emphasized the fund's role to support, not replace, existing resources in the community. While the committee's first instinct was to get money out the door quickly, members had to challenge each other to pause and make intentional decisions about how to leverage investments in creative ways to have greater impact.



"We could have spent all of the money on day one buying food for people," said Dethlefs-Trettin, "but we knew this was going to be a long game and there was so much we didn't know yet. Those were hard conversations."

Boese said, "We were really intentional about pumping the brakes and examining: Who is doing what in the community right now? Who is hurting? What resources are there to help them already? And how can we fill that gap in a collaborative and meaningful way?"

The trusting relationships among committee members allowed difficult conversations to take place. And by pausing for information, members had time to account for state and federal dollars coming into the community.

This thoughtfulness inspired unique approaches to investments, such as providing a loan that allowed HOME, Inc. to apply for a major federal grant and supporting vaccine education and outreach in diverse communities.

Diverse perspectives:

The committee sought a deeper understanding of what was happening in the community from nonprofit partners through surveys, collaborative meetings, and one-on-one conversations. They used the 4 Equity Tool, created by Capital Crossroads, to ask critical questions when making decisions, including what unintended consequences those decisions could have.

Other opportunities to support:

Beyond direct funding to organizations, the committee identified other opportunities to support the nonprofit sector.

"It wasn't just about money," said Miller. "It was about what were all the levers we needed to pull and all the resources we needed to access beyond dollars."



With Community Foundation facilitation, conversations were convened to offer nonprofit leaders a space to share and collaborate. The committee hired a lawyer to provide 30-minute consultations to answer nonprofit leaders' questions about applying for federal assistance to support their operations.

After nonprofits were initially left out of some small business assistance programs, the committee advocated for nonprofits to be recognized as critical "for-impact" businesses that help drive the economy and community. After all, "nonprofit" is a tax status, not a business model.

Elements of Success

These factors contributed to the committee's ability to effectively respond to community needs:

- **Trusting relationships** with each other and nonprofit partners that allowed for difficult, necessary conversations to take place and for strategic decisions to be made quickly.
- **Individuals who served in staff roles** at philanthropic organizations who understood the issues and the work required.
- **A focus on listening** and an awareness of how power and privilege could impact decisions.

"I went home to a house every night," said Kris Schechinger-Camper, Director of Corporate Citizenship at Nationwide. "I had a job that paid me every day and I didn't have to worry about where my next meal would come from, or when the next paycheck would come through, or would I get an unemployment check today. That is not lost on any of us."

DISASTER RECOVERY FUND GRANTS

\$937,400

grants awarded to the following organizations by the Disaster Recovery Fund from March 2020-September 2021.

ORGANIZATION/INITIATIVE	EFFORT/PURPOSE SUPPORTED
Al Éxito	Support for the Centro de Al Éxito assistance program for families impacted by COVID-19.
Central Iowa Immigrant Community Support Fund (an initiative of American Friends Service Committee Iowa, Al Éxito, and Proteus, Inc.)	Meeting the basic needs (rent, utilities, transportation, medicine, etc.) of the most marginalized central Iowans who do not qualify for government resources.
Dental Connections	The purchase of critical health equipment necessary to allow for care of vulnerable populations.
Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC)	Food acquisition and distribution needs to ensure effective and safe delivery to vulnerable populations.
Eat Greater Des Moines & DMARC	Acquisition, safe repackaging, and distribution of bulk food to vulnerable populations within the DMARC pantry system and Eat Greater Des Moines' food rescue network.
Food Bank of Iowa	Food acquisition and distribution needs to ensure effective and safe delivery to vulnerable populations in Greater Des Moines.
Homeless Prevention Loan Pool Fund (HOME, Inc.)	Zero-interest loan that allowed HOME, Inc. to distribute federal housing funds to the Greater Des Moines community as part of CARES Act funding.
IMPACT Community Action Partnership	Meeting utility assistance needs, due to impacts from COVID-19, for families who fall outside of existing utility assistance programs.
Iowa Legal Aid	Increased capacity to provide free, legal services to vulnerable populations impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; legal representation to those facing eviction; help-desk support; and other initiatives.
Orchard Place	Critical telehealth services necessary to provide care for vulnerable populations.
Primary Health Care	Prevention, diversion, and rapid rehousing for individuals and families who are homeless or may be imminently homeless due to the impact of COVID-19; critical telehealth services necessary to care for vulnerable populations.
Polk County Housing Trust Fund	Providing rental assistance payments for families facing eviction through the Justice Center Project, a partnership of several organizations, including Homeward (formerly Polk County Continuum of Care) and Iowa Legal Aid.
Polk County Health Department	A train-the-trainer program, in partnership with the Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa, that equips health navigators and leaders in refugee/immigrant communities with COVID-19 vaccine information to be shared effectively within their communities.
Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa (RACI)	Providing critical COVID-19 information for non-English speaking community members and supporting 20 organizations working with refugee populations via case management and direct service.
Return to Learn <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Éxito • Capitol Park Early Learning Center • Children & Family Urban Movement • Genesis Youth Foundation • Highland Park Community Development Association • Hispanic Education Resources (Conmigo) • Oakridge Neighborhood Services • Willkie House 	"Return to learn" programming that ensures parents can maintain economic stability and youth have safe and supportive environments to learn, grow, and prosper in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Social-Emotional Youth Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis Youth Foundation • Iowa Congolese Organization and Center for Healing • Starts Right Here • Young Women's Resource Center 	Supporting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of youth program participants that have been elevated due to COVID-19.
Win for All (an initiative of Broadlawns and United Way of Central Iowa)	Providing accurate COVID-19 education and access to protective resources, primarily masks and hand sanitizer, with a focus on the African American community.

Food distribution
hosted by DMARC



PHASE ONE: SAFETY NET SERVICES

FUNDING PURPOSE:

To address surging needs across the community and expand capacity so providers could maintain critical safety net services to ensure individuals from vulnerable populations stayed healthy, safe, and in their homes

As schools, businesses, and agencies were shutting their doors to stop the spread of COVID-19, many nonprofits had to quickly decide how to keep employees safe, while meeting the increased need for services. Staff started reaching out to clients one-by-one to determine what challenges families were facing.

Oakridge Neighborhood Services found many of its residents had to keep working, so staff provided PPE, cleaning supplies, and access to testing. They set up vacant units for people to quarantine if they became sick. Other residents lost their jobs and were struggling to pay their bills. Oakridge partnered with efforts, like Principal Foundation's The Giving Chain, to provide hot meals from local restaurants to residents.

"It was a mixture of being proactive and being responsive," said Kristin Littlejohn, Vice President of Development at Oakridge.

Izaah Knox, Executive Director of Urban Dreams, spent the early weeks of the pandemic dropping off food, hand sanitizer, and face masks and disseminating accurate information in neighborhoods. "We did a lot of pivoting," he said. "We were continuing to provide services; it was just being done in different ways."

State leaders called on Iowa Legal Aid to run a hotline for Iowans' legal questions. In less than three days, the hotline was launched, and 200 volunteer lawyers fielded thousands of calls over several months.

Initially, callers were concerned about workplace safety and accessing unemployment benefits. Later on, more and more Iowans called about landlord issues and being unable to pay rent.

United Way of Central Iowa's survey of nonprofits during this time revealed several organizations were already strapped for resources and unable to fundraise as they responded to crises. Many operated over capacity as newly needy families—those who had never accessed services before—requested help.

Initial grants from the Disaster Recovery Fund went toward helping nonprofits acquire and distribute food and to increase their capacity to provide legal, telehealth, and other critical services.

At the height of the crisis, **food insecurity doubled** over pre-pandemic levels and **tripled in households with children.**
(Food Bank of Iowa)



1 in 4

DMARC visitors in 2020 had **never used a food pantry before.**

“Solving hunger and food insecurity in the community is not providing more food.”

Luke Elzinga, DMARC

The Emergency Food System

As Iowans struggled to find toilet paper and grocery staples at local stores, the food pantry network saw a huge spike in clients. Many were first-time pantry users who suddenly faced financial challenges.

At the height of the crisis, food insecurity doubled over pre-pandemic levels and tripled in households with children, according to the Food Bank of Iowa. While food pantry usage eventually decreased as government assistance kicked in, the Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC) saw a record number of unique individuals visit one of its 14 food pantry sites; one in four visitors in 2020 had never used a food pantry before.

Meanwhile, the service delivery model changed dramatically. Instead of allowing individuals the dignified experience of shopping for what they needed, food had to be boxed and delivered, with pantries hoping the packages met families' needs. This change was necessary to limit COVID-19 exposure and to increase pantries' ability to quickly distribute large volumes of food.

At the same time, the cost of food was going up. “We saw an immediate jump in price and an immediate lack of availability of a lot of products, including pineapple and rice,” said Becky Whitlow, DMARC Food Pantry Network Director. Many volunteers could no longer assist due to concerns for their health during this time, increasing the cost of logistics.

Fortunately, the community was focused on the issue of hunger, leading to a spike in donations in March and April 2020.

“This better shared understanding of what food insecurity is, and how it might affect you or your neighbors, created a sense of community,” said Bergetta Beardsley, Vice President of Philanthropy at the Food Bank of Iowa. “Many joined in to provide additional support or support for the first time.”

INNOVATION IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

Disaster Recovery Fund grants helped organizations acquire food and ensure its successful and safe delivery.

As restaurants, hotels, and the Iowa Events Center closed, Eat Greater Des Moines and DMARC partnered to move excess food, and food from distributors serving those businesses, to individuals in need. DMARC and the Food Bank of Iowa increased their use of mobile pantries. DMARC began delivering food boxes directly to people's homes.

These initial distribution methods prepared organizations for the federal Farmers to Families Food Box program. Launched in June 2020, the program connected farmers and food distributors with excess produce, meat, and dairy items to agencies that could quickly distribute thousands of pounds each week. While the program had logistical challenges related to moving large quantities of food in need of refrigeration and quick distribution, it allowed organizations like DMARC and Eat Greater Des Moines to partner with non-pantry sites working directly with clients. Eat Greater Des Moines formed 60 new partnerships, distributing food to refugee and immigrant groups, family-serving organizations, and child care centers.

“Those organizations have relationships and connections directly with families,” said Aubrey Alvarez, Executive Director of Eat Greater Des Moines. “Having access to food further helped those relationships.”

The Food Bank of Iowa partnered with the Iowa National Guard to host several mass mobile distributions and deliver dry boxes, which helped free up space to deliver more perishable food items. The Guard assisted with 40 mobile distributions per month in May, June, and July of 2020.

THE NEED IS GROWING

Some of the emergency food system's adaptations in 2020 will likely remain in place. DMARC plans to continue its at-home delivery model, for example.

“It was something we felt was always out of reach and too difficult to take on,” said Matt Unger, CEO of DMARC, “but the moment required it.”

While the Farmers to Families Food Box program ended in May 2021, Eat Greater Des Moines continues to work with food distributors to move excess produce into the community and is encouraging more retailers with excess food to participate in food rescue efforts.

Leaders note the challenges with food insecurity are just beginning.

Government benefits and other assistance programs have helped reduce pantry usage, but history illustrates numbers will surge again as those programs sunset. Agencies say greater advocacy is needed to address the root causes of food insecurity, which include low wages and limited family assistance.

“Solving hunger and food insecurity in the community is not providing more food,” said Luke Elzinga, Communications and Advocacy Manager at DMARC. “We need to meet the emergency needs of people, but we're not hitting at the root cause of issues and why people are needing to use food pantries.”

Leaders also emphasize a need for sustained community support and a commitment to listening to and meeting the needs of diverse residents, with a focus on providing culturally-specific staples.

Beardsley said reducing food insecurity to pre-pandemic levels will take several years. “We must continue to seek innovative and efficient approaches to food assistance, while ensuring we meet the needs of the most vulnerable Iowans.”

The Refugee Community

In March 2020, an Iowa woman left for South Sudan to attend her brother's funeral. In the middle of her trip, countries everywhere stopped nonessential travel, and she was unable to leave Egypt to reach South Sudan or return to the U.S. Her two teenage children were home by themselves. The mother provided the family's only source of income. She had to wait until July 2020 to return home and, during that time, she lost her job, her vehicle was repossessed, and she was sued by her homeowner's association to pay fees.

The Abyei Ngok Community Association in the U.S. (ANCAUS) connected with Sen. Chuck Grassley's office and the U.S. Embassy to help the mother get home and then worked with her to file for unemployment and navigate other challenges.

"She really felt like, without us, her family could have slipped into a very different panic and chaos," said James Aguek, President of ANCAUS, Inc.

This story illustrates the critical role ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) play in our community—serving as problem solvers, advocates, and support systems through all kinds of challenges. Many leaders work full-time jobs, care for their own families, and volunteer their time to run these organizations with little funding support.

ANCAUS volunteers logged 700 hours in 2020, serving 173 families and a few small businesses. At its center on Merle Hay Road, people stopped by to fill out paperwork, get help with sending emails, use video conferencing services, or seek assistance with other personal challenges.



Meeting at Abyei Ngok Community Association in the U.S. office

"Leveraging smaller ECBOs allowed us to really do more by helping meet the unique needs of diverse residents living on our campus," said Teree Caldwell-Johnson, CEO of Oakridge Neighborhood Services.

The Disaster Recovery Fund provided the Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa (RACI) a \$100,000 grant to distribute to ECBOs for case management and emergency financial support for clients. The grant supported the 20 organizations listed on the next page. While support was limited, "it was the first time many of those organizations had ever felt validated for the work they do," said Stephanie Moris, Director of RACI. "It shouldn't have taken that long to feel appreciated or even just acknowledged as a part of our community."

RACI also helped support ECBOs and refugee communities by running a multilingual helpline that continues today, distributing PPE, and advocating for refugees' needs with funders and decision-makers.

HUMAN STORIES

The impact of ECBOs are "human stories" that are hard to quantify, said Dau Jok, Youth and Talent Director with ANCAUS. During the

pandemic, ECBOs noted many people needed help working through a variety of issues, most commonly with unemployment benefits and government assistance.

EMBARC, an organization serving the Asian community, spent a lot of time translating information from local, state, and federal officials and sharing it in multiple languages through daily newsletters and videos. Mu Paw and Lal Muani, RISE AmeriCorps members, recalled how scared people were in the early days of the pandemic. When neighbors became sick, they'd drop off food on the doorstep and run.

EMBARC's helpline received 3,000 calls from March through early September, which included 32 intensive cases that involved more than 100 hours of communications and support. Staff helped file unemployment and other paperwork, which was a challenge for clients who didn't have access to copiers or email addresses. These experiences inspired the organization to launch a technology navigators program in 2021.

"The staff became emergency workers through the phone," said Moriah Morgan, REACH Program Manager with EMBARC. "It's hard to see sometimes how much work

"The larger community needs to know that immigrant and refugee families are making an impact. We are nurses taking care of families in hospitals. We are in grocery stores providing food. We are at meatpacking plants. We are housekeepers and doctors. We are contributing members of the community, and we all deserve the same space to grow and to learn and to feel safe."

Tricia Gabriel, Genesis Youth Foundation



Genesis Youth Foundation students

The following organizations received Disaster Recovery Fund grants through RACI for case management and emergency financial support for clients:

African Immigrants and Refugees Transition Services (AIRTS)

Al Éxito

Bhutanese Community in Iowa

Child Future International

Iowa Chin Community

Congolese Youth Connect

Genesis Youth Foundation

Hindu Cultural and Educational Center

Iowa Congolese Organization And Center For Healing

Karen Association of Iowa

Latinas Unidas Por Un Nuevo Amanecer (L.U.N.A.)

Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity

Muslim Community Organization

Nisaa African Family Services

Rwandan Community of Iowa

United Upper Nile South Sudanese Community Food Bank

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Des Moines

Brown Brown Foundation

African Community Institute

Shalom Covenant

Mu Paw and Muani are doing because it's behind the scenes. There's not a light on it."

Moris said she anticipated these challenges when, during disaster preparation conversations, no one had a good answer for how to reach people who did not speak English.

"We've lost amazing community leaders whose hearts broke during this year," she said. "We have communities that carried our state's economy through a pandemic and all the while were left on their own."

YOUTH SUPPORT

Many ECBOs focused on supporting youth who suddenly had to learn virtually with limited access to technology, while their families continued to work or struggled financially.

Previously offering after-school programming for African youth, Genesis Youth Foundation quickly pivoted to provide at-home learning when schools closed in March 2020. Within two weeks, the staff created a platform for 125 students to continue to learn and offered incentives to encourage them. They delivered laptops, a whiteboard, markers, crayons, and breakfast items.

When classes resumed remotely in the fall, Genesis hired two mothers to support students with schoolwork.

"The kids who were struggling in school had no outside resources to really help them," said Tricia Gabriel, Co-Founder and Program Director at Genesis.

Genesis supported students in giving back to the community. They organized a mask campaign for families and health care workers. Students also

delivered food to families over the summer. The organization created video messages in multiple languages to share health and safety information with African communities and hosted meetings each Saturday for leaders to talk about common concerns and to collaborate on accessing resources.

The pandemic forced many refugees to relive past trauma from war, scarce resources, and isolation.

"Mentally, that was really, really bad," said Sam Gabriel, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Genesis. "And then they still had to go to work."

'MORE THAN OUR STRUGGLES'

In South Sudan, the word "ciang" describes a way of life centered around community. In his role as national director of ANCAUS, Aguek travels to different states to stand with families at funerals. He is called on to solve conflicts within families and the community. When there's a misunderstanding at school, James or Bagat Aguek, the Director of Iowa's chapter, show up to support the students.

"This is collective work," said James Aguek, "because we believe society is bettered when every individual takes action."

Genesis also focuses on community-building, and soccer is an important part of that. It coaches the only all-Black soccer teams in the state. Often, it's the first experience other teams have had playing Black soccer players.

"We are trying to be more intentional about building the bridge with exposure to cultures and giving people a chance to experience each other in that way," said Sam Gabriel.



Oakridge
Neighborhood
school
programming

PHASE TWO: UNMET NEEDS

FUNDING PURPOSE:
To support providers addressing unmet needs of vulnerable populations that remained after identifying and leveraging local, state, and federal resources

Throughout 2020, the Disaster Recovery Fund addressed many unmet needs. With the support of these grants, kids were offered safe and enriching places to learn, those facing eviction received financial and legal assistance to stay in their homes, and immigrant and refugee organizations provided information and support to their communities. These investments met what the committee saw as growing needs in the community as people struggled to navigate complex systems to receive assistance and helplines received higher volumes of calls from individuals seeking support.

Iowa Legal Aid created a special division to handle evictions as those cases spiked from about 25% of its total case load in Iowa to 50%. The organization collaborated with the Polk County Housing Trust Fund and other partners to launch the Justice Center Project, which met landlords and tenants at the Polk County Courthouse to pay overdue rent to prevent evictions.

Leaders of ethnic community-based organizations, often volunteers, stretched themselves to help families stay safe and healthy, apply for government benefits, and work through unique challenges. Several nonprofits operating over capacity found creative ways to safely serve clients with complex problems in person.

Early in the pandemic, the Disaster Recovery Fund heard stories about immigrants and refugees working at meat-processing plants with little or no protection. The committee understood that the Latinx community is often intentionally silent about its needs due to fears of deportation and violence, even if members are U.S. citizens. The committee increasingly recognized the individuals most impacted by the pandemic were not being heard and were not receiving critical information and resources. Greater Des Moines needed to make larger investments in specific communities to address their unique challenges.

Another unexpected obstacle was the economic and health impacts on kids and families as schools remained virtual for much of the fall and winter.

“It really reinforced how many barriers and how many systems were challenged even before the pandemic hit,” said Renée Miller, Chief Community Impact Officer at United Way of Central Iowa. “With schools, there was the issue of equitable access to technology and reliable internet, parents having to work, and meeting all the other needs of students and families that schools serve. Those things are not new issues; they just became so much more apparent.”

“We’ve had a combination of virtual slide, COVID slide, summer slide, and another virtual slide. This further exacerbates what we knew was problematic for students.”

Teree Caldwell-Johnson, Oakridge Neighborhood Services

Return To Learn

As schools transitioned to virtual learning, many out-of-school programs shifted to providing full-day support while parents continued to work. These programs offered tutoring and helped students secure computers, internet access, supplies, and food.

“Youth from all backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses have faced difficulties academically this past year,” said Jonathan Cardamone, Executive Director of Willkie House. “There needs to be an understanding that certain populations have faced more difficulties than others. Some families and schools can afford extra tutoring, academic assistance, and other programming, whereas these are out of reach for many low-income families. Funding should be allocated to those who need it most.”

Willkie House never paused its child care and out-of-school programming. Funding allowed the organization to purchase supplies to meet CDC safety guidelines. A Disaster Recovery Fund grant helped the organization support students full time heading into fall 2020.

With Disaster Recovery Fund funding, Oakridge Neighborhood Services expanded its after-school programming to provide a place for students to go for up to 10 hours each day. It hired retired teachers to supplement students’ learning and sped up plans to update its computer lab. Staff troubleshooted technology issues and guided students through their schoolwork.

During summer 2021, Oakridge partnered with Des Moines Public Schools to offer supplemental education, especially for kids who had fallen behind in coursework over the past year.

“We’ve had a combination of virtual slide, COVID slide, summer slide, and another virtual slide,” said Terece Caldwell-Johnson, CEO of Oakridge Neighborhood Services and Des Moines Public Schools board member. “This further exacerbates what we knew was problematic for students.”



Al Éxito students

The Latinx Community

At the start of the pandemic, Dawn Martinez Oropeza, Executive Director of Al Éxito, worried how her organization would continue its programming with little operating funds left. But she knew the need among youth, as well as the broader Latinx community, was great.

A needs assessment confirmed that many Latinx families in rural communities were working without any safety precautions, while many families in Greater Des Moines were suddenly unemployed. Most youth participating in the organization’s programs didn’t have technology to access virtual schooling, and their families were struggling to pay rent and purchase food.

“Many families remained willfully hidden during this time, reluctant to seek assistance,” said Martinez Oropeza. “They were worried people were going to accuse them of taking assistance when a lot of them are in immigration status. They wouldn’t even ask their church.”

The American Friends Service Committee convened weekly meetings of immigrant advocates to keep everyone informed on what was happening across the state. They heard stories of immigrants employed in meatpacking plants with no protection other than a nylon sheet between workers. Communities where plants were located saw spikes in COVID-19 infections.

These outbreaks heightened fears among Latinx people. In an Al Éxito evaluation, one youth said that they were not allowed to leave the house because their parents were scared people would blame them for the coronavirus.

The Disaster Recovery Fund COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee listened to these challenges and brought together Al Éxito, Proteus, Inc., and American Friends Service Committee to seek advice on how to support the Latinx community. These three organizations created a fund to help cover rent, utilities, health care bills, and other needs of central Iowans to fill this identified gap in assistance. Within two days, the program was up and running with an initial \$25,000 grant from the Disaster Recovery Fund.

As those dollars quickly ran out, additional donors supported the fund, including an anonymous donor who stepped in with a \$900,000 gift to expand the geographic scope of the work. Martinez Oropeza hired two students to do outreach in the community.

Within a few months, \$1.1 million went to more than 1,000 households, impacting 4,000 Iowans.

YOUTH SUPPORT

Previous studies had already shown technology to be a huge barrier for Latinx students. “Our kids didn’t have access to reliable technology or internet,” Martinez Oropeza said, “and so I knew the state of schooling was going to be devastating.”

In spring 2020, Al Éxito provided mobile hotspots and helped families apply for Mediacom’s internet assistance program. Martinez Oropeza drove food to families’ houses throughout Des Moines. Her organization provided a mental health workshop to help students with stress.



Farmworkers meeting with Proteus, Inc. health aides

As Des Moines Public Schools remained virtual for most of the fall and winter, Al Éxito created Compa en Camino (Partners on the Go) with Disaster Recovery Fund support. The program accepted calls from students any time and paired each student with a mentor.

After a school district employee heard about the program, calls exploded. Al Éxito served K-12 students, offering tutoring in five languages. It advocated for families' needs with the school district and, when students returned to school in person, provided transportation for students to get there.

A VOICE FOR THE LATINX COMMUNITY

Experiencing the huge gap in assistance for the Latinx community led Al Éxito to join community partners in launching the Latinx Project with initial grants from Mid-Iowa Health Foundation and the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines. The project is gathering data on the Latinx community and elevating Latinx leaders.

"It is time to make everybody feel like they're a part of the community," said Martinez Oropeza. "The political rhetoric about Latinos has already done damage to the kids. Latinos are going to be one in five Polk County residents in 20 years, and they don't feel supported right now."

Al Éxito hopes to expand its Compa en Camino program to create a center where Latinx individuals and others can go for information and assistance, depending on funding to continue to the program past summer 2021.

PROTECTIONS FOR FARMWORKERS

As meatpacking plants experienced COVID-19 outbreaks, Proteus reached out to state leaders to put measures in place that would protect the 3,000 migrant farmworkers set to arrive in summer 2020. Many traveled from other places and resided in communal settings in rural areas, playing a vital role in Iowa's agricultural economy.

These meetings led to state support to implement safety measures, including offering free testing, placing workers in pods of 2-4 people, providing hotel rooms to quarantine if anyone tested positive, serving hot meals twice a day, and having follow-up health care on site. The organization also provided information about testing and safety measures to address misconceptions.

Daniel Zinnel, CEO of Proteus, called these measures "lifesaving." While cases spiked occasionally, outbreaks were quickly contained.

Proteus also saw a new opportunity to provide its primary health care services at meatpacking plants. The organization launched a pilot project at one facility in summer 2021 to test a model it hopes will improve the health and well-being of employees and their families, while improving business performance.

THE NEED IS STILL GREAT

Looking back on the past year, Erica Johnson, Founding Executive Director of Iowa Migrant Movement for Justice

An initial Disaster Recovery Fund investment leveraged

\$1.1 million

to help cover rent, utilities, health care bills, and other needs of 1,000 Iowa households that did not qualify for government assistance.

(formerly the American Friends Service Committee and Iowa Justice for Our Neighbors organizations), said there is "an overarching feeling of anxiety that we couldn't do more. The need is so great, and there's so much to do, and we just can't anymore."

Johnson was in the process of launching the newly merged organization when the pandemic hit. It became an opportunity to recognize the strengths of her organization and the role it could play. Relying on trusted relationships with immigrant and refugee organizations across Iowa, the organization convened meetings to identify needs and common areas of concern and then connect people to resources.

The lack of safety at meatpacking plants was one concern. Iowa's English-only law discouraged public agencies from reaching out to non-English speaking communities, and assistance was unavailable for undocumented immigrants.

"There was a lack of capacity from the get-go," Johnson said, "and then the expectation we would pick up the pieces when the pieces or systems should have been in place."

Her organization hired an organizer to work with employees at meatpacking plants after seeing the hardships they faced as essential workers.

The organizations involved in responding to the pandemic continue to meet and plan to address needs that are still unmet. The Latinx Project partners expect to release data toward the end of 2021 in an effort to spotlight the needs and strengths of the Latinx community.

Homeless Prevention

As nonprofit staff adjusted to new ways of doing work, many in the homeless prevention space received an influx of calls. Disputes between tenants and landlords increased as people spent more time at home. Thousands of people were suddenly unemployed, causing them to fall behind on rent. Family and friends began staying together in small spaces, leaving no quarantine options when someone became sick.

Many stakeholders in the emergency housing community came together quickly to discuss what they were hearing and to work through challenges.

The Polk County Housing Trust Fund and other funders made immediate investments in computers and technology for staff at housing organizations to work remotely. They covered packaging for meals to be served individually rather than in communal settings. They created options for putting unsheltered individuals in hotels when they tested positive for COVID-19 to avoid outbreaks at homeless shelters.

Primary Health Care's Centralized Intake team had to continue to show up in person despite safety concerns to serve those who were homeless.

Staff became experts on the eviction moratorium, CDC guidelines, and stimulus check distribution policies. They saw what it was like to navigate complicated systems. To receive some state benefits, homeless individuals had to provide a previous address, verify their income in the past 60 days, and mail in their IDs, among other steps. A grant from the Disaster Recovery Fund to the Diversion Fund, created to support homeless prevention efforts, provided flexible resources quickly to support agencies doing this work.

Soon, a greater problem emerged: An increasing number of people were falling significantly behind on rent. A moratorium prohibiting evictions with individuals experiencing income loss due to COVID-19 was set to expire in September 2020, and leaders feared a sudden spike in homelessness.

RENTAL ASSISTANCE ARRIVES

With calls to its housing hotline spiking, HOME, Inc. saw the need for rental assistance for central Iowans. When the federal government released the Emergency Solutions Grant, leaders recognized no other organization was positioned to administer the grant and took steps to apply.



The grant required HOME, Inc. to take one lump sum of money for homeless prevention and rapid rehousing, even though different agencies served those roles. In addition, the organization had to bill for expenses incurred, which meant HOME, Inc. needed the cash to cover immediate expenses before reimbursement several weeks later. The organization was already struggling from a loss of income as staff focused on crisis response and stopped fundraising. Only one counselor knew the intensive system of working on homeless prevention; the rest of the staff had to get up to speed while taking an influx of landlord-tenant dispute calls.

The organization worked through each step. The Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines and the Disaster Recovery Fund provided financial support to leverage a loan that gave HOME, Inc. a pool of money to make payments while waiting to be reimbursed by the federal government. The nonprofit subcontracted with Primary Health Care and Anawim Housing to manage the rapid rehousing response. It also established a memorandum of understanding with Centralized Intake to be able to accept calls through its hotline.

As the grant got underway, HOME, Inc. went from taking 100 calls a week to about 500. At one point, it shut down its landlord-tenant dispute line just to manage calls for rental assistance.

In six months, HOME, Inc. distributed more than \$500,000 in rental assistance to 249 households in Polk County.

\$40 million in funding has gone toward rental assistance in Polk County.

\$28.8 million has been distributed to **6,326 households** through IMPACT since March 2020.

\$1.8 million was distributed to more than **1,000 households** over six months through the Justice Center Project.

Pam Carmichael, Executive Director Emeritus of HOME, Inc., said that, while staff was committed to applying for the grant, no one realized the amount of work it would require and how stressful it would be. Because they were never sure how much money was coming and when, they couldn't hire additional staff. Everyone contributing funding for the effort, including the federal government, the City of Des Moines, and private funders, had different requirements. Each rental assistance claim required proof of income, a copy of the lease, a notice showing a tenant was behind on rent, and an inspection of the apartment.

"I don't think there was any true understanding of what people were going through at that time," said Carmichael. "It really took a toll on our people."

EVICTION RESPONSE

By the time rental assistance arrived, many people were already facing eviction cases in court. "We were trying to patch together what limited resources we had to keep people housed until that first wave of dollars came," said Eric Burmeister, Executive Director of the Polk County Housing Trust Fund. "And when it came, by that time, it was totally insufficient to deal with the built-up problem we had with people literally months behind on rent."

The Polk County Board of Supervisors approached organizations, including the Polk County Housing Trust Fund and Iowa Legal Aid, to see what could be done. The Board of Supervisors' initial funding launched the Justice Center Project at the Polk County Courthouse, where staff provided legal assistance and cash payments for rent to try to settle eviction cases that were going to court despite the moratorium in place. The Disaster Recovery Fund provided additional funds that leveraged more donations to sustain the work.

From September 1, 2020, until the middle of February 2021, when the Polk County Housing Trust Fund shifted management to IMPACT, the organization provided \$1.8 million in rental assistance to more than 1,000 households.

Burmeister, who worked at the courthouse often, heard stories of mothers prepared to sleep in their cars until they could figure out where to live and saw kids listening to their teachers on their computers while their parents were heading into court to lose their homes.

CENTRAL IOWA LEADS IN COORDINATION

The number of programs working to prevent homelessness and restabilize homeless individuals doubled during the pandemic, said Angie Arthur, Executive Director of Homeward. This increase was driven by a greater need for services, as well as significant funding available to address housing instability.

Homeward coordinated where funding was coming to programs from local, state, federal, and private sources, identified gaps in funding, and helped piece together options to ensure services were available without disruption. "It was a lot of balancing when funding was coming in, what can we do with that funding, and are we meeting the needs we have in our community," Arthur said.

The organization also developed flyers on how people could get assistance to prevent eviction depending on the programs available where they lived. Its informational flyers were translated into multiple languages and distributed to partners locally and across the state.

A major source of aid came through the U.S. Dept. of the Treasury's Emergency Rental Assistance program beginning in early 2021. The City of Des Moines, Polk County, and other stakeholders decided to administer the program separate from the state and partnered with IMPACT Community Action Partnership, which was already providing rent and utility assistance to low-income individuals. Working through a nonprofit sped up the process, using a basic case-management model.

"I don't think anyone was prepared for the scope and the scale and the urgency that we would feel," said Anne Bacon, Executive Director of IMPACT. "Preventing eviction means moving as quickly as possible and as efficiently as possible and still knowing the pain of falling short, but we were able to do something that was extremely important in making landlords whole, preventing evictions, and trying to help families re-stabilize."

Over about 19 months, IMPACT distributed \$28.8 million in rent assistance to 6,326 households in Polk County, which benefited nearly 7,000 children. Central Iowa was recognized by the federal government for being the first community to fully administer rounds 1 and 2 of Emergency Rental Assistance funding

and partners are now looking at options to continue the program based on need.

"There's a large segment of our population that is still experiencing significant economic challenges," said Bacon. "At some level, all of these issues come down to mathematics. If your income is X and your expenses are Y, and Y is bigger than X, that's problematic."

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS NEEDED

Those aided by the Justice Center Project will have eviction notices on their records even after their cases were dismissed. The rental assistance provided didn't fix the fact that many people cannot afford housing in central Iowa. Iowa Legal Aid now has a division dedicated to eviction cases.

"We've plugged the hole with the crisis situation," said Carmichael, "but how do we make things more sustainable into the future?"

"We will likely never, in the next generation, see the kind of resources for housing we have right now," Burmeister said. "We need to make sure these resources are used in a way that helps to create long-term, sustainable solutions to the problem."

Solutions could include expanding long-term, permanent rental assistance and supporting people of color, who have long been shut out of the housing market, to make down payments on houses, said Burmeister.

Nick Smithberg, Executive Director of Iowa Legal Aid, said women are the primary clients in 65% of its eviction cases and African Americans are the primary clients in 36%. A significant percentage have a disability. Addressing deeper issues, such as low wages and limited child care and transportation options, can help prevent one small emergency from sending someone into a spiral and losing their home.

Housing advocates continue to discuss the challenges and coordinate responses especially as the CDC's eviction moratorium ended in August.

"I think funding can be divisive sometimes," said Jan Zeleke, Program Director at HOME, Inc. "You have to fight for a piece of it. But when we need to come together and find solutions to big problems, we are able to do that in this community."

PHASE 3: LONG-TERM RECOVERY AND REBUILDING STRATEGIES

FUNDING FOCUS:

To support planning and preparedness activities for restoration and future disasters that may impact our community

While making decisions, the Disaster Recovery Fund COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee recognized an ever-present tension between responding to immediate needs and preparing to support long-term challenges remaining potentially for years after the pandemic ends. Like the passing of a terrible storm, the rebuilding period is often much longer and requires greater investment.

Many systemic challenges existed before the pandemic, and the committee recognized they might only grow worse as government assistance waned. Pantry use was already at record levels. Affordable housing was virtually unavailable to low-wage workers.

“People are told they failed in some way, when the system failed them,” said Luke Elzinga, Communications and Advocacy Manager at DMARC. “A lot of people respond when there’s an emergency but not when it’s an ongoing crisis.”

New problems also emerged during the pandemic. Health care organizations saw a spike in medical

issues, such as STDs, cancer, depression, and anxiety, as many people chose not to seek immediate care due to safety concerns. Substance use and mental health emergencies strained a patchwork system. Domestic violence and bankruptcy cases increased.

The combined forces of the pandemic, economic crisis, and social unrest exposed deeply rooted issues that have long existed but have never been so visibly recognized or acknowledged. Our community must take bolder action.

Right now, we have an opportunity to target our attention and resources on areas that have long seen underinvestment and to honor the voices of residents telling us what they need to recover and thrive. The COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee continues to listen, consider unmet needs that remain during the pandemic, and decide how to best leverage its dollars to create long-term sustainable solutions.

We need a better normal.

Vaccination Outreach

As vaccines rolled out through the Polk County Health Department, Nola Aigner Davis, Public Health Communications Officer, recognized a need to make sure messaging was targeted toward immigrant and refugee communities in a way that addressed their specific concerns.

With a grant from the Disaster Recovery Fund, the Health Department and the Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa trained leaders of ethnic community-based organizations, churches, and other community groups about the vaccine and provided guides to address specific questions or concerns for each population. Then they paid these leaders \$20 an hour to translate the information into other languages, create videos, spread awareness through Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, meet one-on-one with community members, and develop other creative outreach strategies.

In March and April 2021, 25 trainers logged 2,700 billable hours. The result has been increased visits to vaccination clinics, with many communities shifting from the majority

feeling hesitant about the vaccine to the majority becoming vaccinated.

EMBARC has seen a significant shift in the Southeast Asian communities the organization serves. “As the vaccine became available, about 90 percent of those I talked to in my community said they didn’t want to get vaccinated, but by the second week of April, they were calling me and asking if they could get the vaccine,” said Mu Paw, a RISE AmeriCorps member.

Paw and Lal Muani, another RISE AmeriCorps member, attribute this success to efforts addressing their community’s specific concerns, providing one-on-one education, and modeling the experience of getting the vaccine. By May 2021, EMBARC had provided 326 one-on-one education sessions and helped more than 500 people get the vaccine.

“By EMBARC organizing the vaccine clinic, we helped our community and they appreciated it because they don’t have the



resources to get it,” said Muani.

“It takes a community to be competent in the type of health care we provide and that means educating all ethnic community-based organizations on the health concerns we face and working together to make sure everyone’s needs are met,” said Aigner Davis. “That is the only way we can move forward to make sure everyone receives the type of health care they want and deserve. This approach has been incredibly successful and is a model we will continue to use to tackle other public health issues.”

THE ROLE OF NONPROFITS

The nonprofit sector was at the forefront of our community's pandemic response. They were called on by the state to run hotlines and to disseminate health and safety information. Staff responded at all hours to complex crises and witnessed deep tragedies. They helped those struggling to navigate systems and access support—all while operating with minimal resources and significant stress. Much of this work continues today.

“What makes me proud as a nonprofit leader is that we showed the world it’s nonprofits that are diving in and being a part of the solution. We helped families stay in homes. We dealt with food insecurity. We kept kids in school. So many peers in our space created avenues for us to get through the pandemic and still thrive.”

Renee Hardman, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Iowa

A United Way of Central Iowa survey of nonprofits in December 2020 found that:



83%

anticipated a projected financial challenge, such as decreases in donations, cancelled fundraising events, or changes in services.



80%

of programs were operating at or above maximum capacity, with 22% operating above and beyond to meet increased demands.



About half

noted challenges, including lack of adequate space due to COVID guidelines, a strained workforce, and difficulties providing PPE and helping clients meet basic needs.

“Going forward, I hope our community has an even deeper appreciation for the breadth, the passion, the tireless work, and the innovation of the nonprofit sector.”

Angela Dethlefs-Trettin, Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines

Critical roles played by the nonprofit sector:

GOVERNMENT PARTNERS

Nonprofit organizations, including Iowa Legal Aid and United Way of Central Iowa, were called on by the state to manage hotlines for people with concerns. Ethnic community-based organizations translated health, safety, and assistance information and distributed critical messages through videos and across channels that would reach their communities.

COMMUNITY HUBS

Organizations served as centers where people could go for information, access computers for school or to apply for government assistance, hold video meetings, or figure out how to solve specific problems. Nonprofit staff served as case managers, helping people navigate complex systems to get unemployment and other benefits. They became advocates for people who were told they owed their unemployment benefits back to the state or faced other legal issues.

“Everything about the pandemic has required flexibility in how we serve people, because there’s no other way for us,” said Shelby Ridley, Homeless Support Services Program Director at Primary Health Care. “We never felt it was an option to close. People continued to access us, and I think we were a safe haven for a lot of folks.”

POLICY EXPERTS

Many nonprofit staff members had to quickly become versed in new laws so they could help clients interpret the guidance and make decisions. For example, Ridley noted her team had to become experts in helping homeless individuals receive stimulus checks.

“There were tons of emergent legal issues that cropped up and forced us to be quick studies,” said Nick Smithberg, Executive Director of Iowa Legal Aid. “Not only did we generate a ton of new content on our website, but we were also reactive to the needs in the community.”

THE TOLL ON STAFF

When the pandemic became a real threat, nonprofit leaders recall pausing to consider their staff’s needs.

“Our first natural tendency is to think about the community and what we do for the community,” said Renée Miller, Chief Community Impact Officer at United Way of Central Iowa. “But this was a moment when we had to pause and ensure our own staff was safe and healthy, so we could be positioned to respond to the community.”

Tray Wade, CEO of EveryStep, decided he didn’t want staff to be burdened with worry about whether they would have a job. Staff who could no longer work in their traditional roles partnered with other organizations to deliver meals and PPE to the community.

Many leaders expressed that constantly pivoting and increasing capacity to meet demands took a toll on staff. Many experienced fear and anxiety for themselves and their families. They lived through their own emergencies, including contracting COVID-19 and surviving a derecho that tore across the state in August 2020.

“The stress and isolation of working this way takes its toll,” said Smithberg of Iowa Legal Aid.

Many organizations offered wellness opportunities for staff. They set up virtual check-ins and hosted fun social activities, like virtual trivia games, to take people’s minds off the seriousness of their work. Leaders also had to make difficult decisions to balance caseloads with staff capacity, which meant not always being able to serve everyone who needed help.

Pam Carmichael, Executive Director Emeritus of HOME, Inc., said that her staff had to do more work without increased pay or benefits. “How do we help build the capacity of nonprofits, so they can get good people, keep good people, and make sure they aren’t eligible for the programs we provide?” she wondered.

The Role of Private Funding

“The pandemic was a time for funders to dare greatly and take bold action,” said Angela Dethlefs-Trettin with the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines. “Not all decisions had guaranteed outcomes. This tension between taking risks and maintaining fiduciary responsibility is both a burden and a privilege.”

The Disaster Recovery Fund COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee recognized it could never meet every need during the pandemic. Instead, it leveraged its investments in ways that allowed nonprofits to receive other funding or implement innovative solutions quickly. Two main goals were to not overcomplicate the grantmaking process and to value the expertise of nonprofits to address issues.

Many nonprofit organizations appreciated the community’s generosity and flexible grantmaking. Even beyond the Disaster Recovery Fund, organizations and individuals gave generously. United Way of Central Iowa, for example, released an additional \$1.8 million into the sector. The Community Foundation and Mid-Iowa Health Foundation each gave about \$100,000 in additional COVID-19 response grants to support nonprofits and provided strategic collaborative support.

“So many organizations called and said: ‘What do you need for your community?’” recalled Dawn Martinez Oropeza, Executive Director of Al Éxito. “That was a shift in how Des Moines has operated in the past.”

“It was a much more equitable distribution of funds throughout the community than it has been in the past, because of the pandemic and social unrest,” said Izaah Knox, Executive Director of Urban Dreams.

“It sort of happened with no strings attached,” said Teree Caldwell-Johnson, CEO of Oakridge Neighborhood Services. “You didn’t have to answer a bunch of extra questions. It just literally happened, and I think the noble nature of giving during COVID speaks to how we can loosen all the whistles and bells associated with grantmaking and make it easier for the community to ask.”

WHAT WE LEARNED

At the start of the pandemic, we often heard the phrase: “We are all in the same boat.” Everyone was impacted in some way. But we quickly understood those of us who could access resources, support systems, and opportunities would weather the storm, while others had to navigate huge waves with nothing more than a raft. We were all in the same storm, but we had very different boats.

“The community learned at a very broad level that, even without a pandemic, there are people who suffer and who struggle every day,” said Eric Burmeister, Executive Director of the Polk County Housing Trust Fund. “I think the pandemic has caused those folks—and more who have become like them because of the pandemic—to step out of the shadows.”

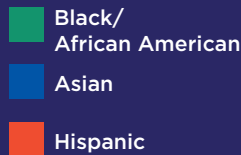
Rates of hospitalization and death from COVID-19 in the U.S.

Rate ratios compared to White, Non-Hispanic persons

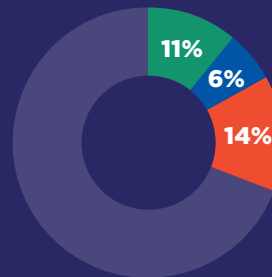
	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latino
Cases	0.7x	1.1x	1.9x
Hospitalizations	1.0x	2.8x	2.8x
Death	1.0x	2.0x	2.3x

Source: CDC, Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death By Race/Ethnicity, updated Sept. 2021

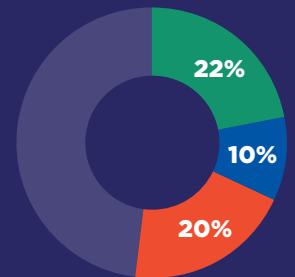
Use of DMARC Food Pantry among Des Moines residents in 2020



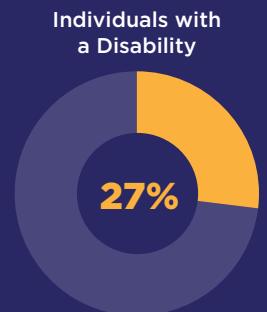
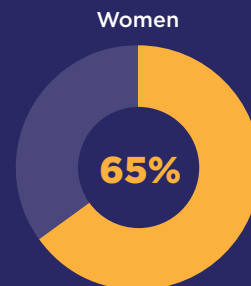
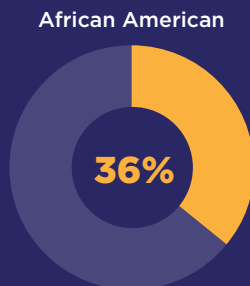
Percent of General Population in Des Moines



Percent of DMARC Food Pantry Users



Demographics of Polk County clients Iowa Legal Aid has served from March 2020-June 2021



“We do not have equal opportunity for all to thrive in our community. Until we all believe that and know that in our hearts and minds, we cannot move this community forward.”

Elisabeth Buck, United Way of Central Iowa

While we knew challenges existed before the pandemic, we, as a community, are now called to officially acknowledge them and to identify and invest in more effective solutions.

As we reflect on what we have witnessed throughout the pandemic, we must hold onto these lessons:

1

LISTEN SO DEEPLY THAT YOU ARE CHANGED BY WHAT YOU HEAR.

The five members who sat on the Disaster Recovery Fund COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee recognized their experiences and perspectives were limited and they needed to intentionally reach out to the community to inform their actions. Through surveys and one-on-one conversations, they tried to capture what was happening among diverse populations.

“It was our opportunity to ensure we were listening to the right voices, and we weren’t making assumptions about what the needs were or what the solutions should be,” said Renée Miller, Chief Community Impact Officer at United Way of Central Iowa. “We were very intentional about having conversations with organizations and individuals serving those who are the most vulnerable in our community.”

They also understood decisions they made could, and did, have unintended consequences. For example, in the process of streamlining grants to ethnic community-based organizations, the committee missed an opportunity to elevate the often hidden organizations doing important work.

Video conferencing allowed leaders providing direct services in the community to jump into a planning meeting and provide regular input. Still, much more work needs to be done to include the voices of the organizations and individuals directly experiencing challenges. We need to ensure their expertise is guiding our decisions, and we must allow them to lead in making decisions that are best for their communities.

2

AUTHENTIC COLLABORATION LEADS TO GREATER IMPACT.

Greater Des Moines prides itself on being a community built on relationships. The COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee witnessed and helped foster deeper collaborations among organizations working on similar issues. Together, they identified common challenges and coordinated resources and solutions.

“The pandemic created an urgency that made partnerships necessary,” said Daniel Zinnel, CEO of Proteus, Inc.

Hospital leaders made joint decisions about how to handle tricky situations and what to communicate to the community. Homeless prevention organizations divided up the work to maximize assistance. Immigrant and refugee organizations discussed how to collectively advocate for their communities’ needs.

“The pandemic would have looked a lot different if we had not had trusting relationships prior,” said Shelby Ridley, Homeless Support Services Program Director at Primary Health Care. “They just got stronger and more flexible.”

Trust was critical to success. You could quickly see a difference among coordination, cooperation, collaboration, and co-existence of groups. Some relationships were strained, and the work siloed.

We must continue to deepen relationships outside of crisis situations.

“It’s about community impact and responsiveness to a community,” said Miller. “When you have unwillingness to collaborate, all that does is hurt the people you are trying to serve.”

3

NONPROFITS ARE RESPONSIVE AND INNOVATIVE.

The COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee and many nonprofit partners had to balance rapid response to needs with thoughtful approaches to leveraging resources and relationships.

Donors gave generously to help nonprofits respond to emergency needs, and organizations were able to expand programs and add staff. Several nonprofits serving youth, for example, began serving entire families, recognizing that, if parents were struggling, youth would also struggle. Others changed the way they delivered services to better meet clients where they were.

“The pandemic really allowed us the freedom to try new things,” Zinnel noted.

Because the Disaster Recovery Fund allowed flexibility in how dollars were spent, nonprofits could leverage greater funding and have a bigger impact. For example, when the committee created a revolving loan for HOME, Inc., the organization was able to apply for a major federal grant to provide rent assistance.

“Sometimes our sector isn’t seen as being able to pivot quickly or being resourceful or innovative,” said Angela Dethlefs-Trettin, Chief Community Impact Officer of the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines. “Hands down, this was a prime example of where our sector excels time and again.”

HOW WE MOVE FORWARD

While the pandemic continues, this moment of reflection gives us an opportunity to look toward the future. In the months and years ahead, as we return to the workplace, visit family and friends, eat at restaurants, attend local events, and send our kids to school, we need to remember what we experienced, and continue to experience, during this time.

For many in our community, returning to “normal” is already a tremendous challenge. They may not want to return to what was. The struggles of 2020 have only exacerbated the burdensome conditions in which some of our community members live. We cannot return to normal. We need something different—something better.

We’ve identified several opportunities for change.

“Midway through the crisis, we removed the word ‘vulnerable’ from our mission statement with intent. People struggling are not the most vulnerable; they are the most resilient individuals in our community, and they have a heck of a lot to teach us collectively about where the issues exist, how the systems are broken, and how we should be doing it completely differently than we have before.”

Suzanne Mineck, Mid-Iowa Health Foundation

BETTER SYSTEMS: Our systems are strained and difficult to navigate. They often generate harm and mistrust. We need to create new or better systems of support, with the people who are impacted serving as key members of the decision-making process.

VALUING NONPROFITS: Nonprofit organizations are vital businesses, even if they receive tax exemptions, and need to be valued and invested in as an important part of our economic and community recovery.

PLANNING: We need to continue to plan for unthinkable disasters. How can we raise funds and have planning conversations during non-crisis times, so we are ready when calamity strikes? Preparation must take place across our community, with extra support for our nonprofits.

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING: The collaboration and partnerships we’ve achieved need to be sustained beyond times of crisis. This means building relationships and trust in order to have hard conversations. It means letting go of our existing circles of influence and our positions of power to listen to those who have been and continue to be marginalized. We must empower them to lead and participate in the solutions we create together.

UPSTREAM SOLUTIONS: We need to recognize and acknowledge the struggles people face on a daily basis, outside of collective crises, and ask ourselves: What are the fundamental changes that must be made to address those challenges? How can we make progress on critical issues—such as livable wages, affordable housing and child care, and quality health care—to ensure people have the resources they need to build a foundation sturdy enough to weather a disaster?

EQUITY: The pandemic exposed the stark disparities that have long existed in our community and have significant impact on people of color. We need to remember our collective history, invest in communities that have been harmed and undervalued for decades and centuries, and elevate diverse leaders in a way that creates an inclusive and healthy community for all.



Mural, titled "Future," on the Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families building

BEYOND HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

The pandemic sent ripple effects through many sectors of our community. Here are two perspectives from those working outside health and human services.

“It’s going to take every sector to move forward. We have big opportunities before us, but it’s going to take big solutions, cross-sector solutions, and working together.”

Sally Dix, Bravo Greater Des Moines

BUSINESS

“The Greater Des Moines region has outperformed its Midwest peers in population and economic growth over the past decade,” said Jay Byers, CEO of the Greater Des Moines Partnership. “While the pandemic created challenges for specific industries and impacted job and educational opportunities, the region has remained strong in many ways.”

Big projects, including a world-renowned skatepark, water trails, and a professional soccer stadium, have remained on track.

“One thing that sets Greater Des Moines apart is it continues to invest in itself,” said Byers. “All of these amazing projects are moving forward through a tough time. No other region our size—and I’m not sure any other region in the country—has this level of projects moving forward.”

“Placemaking” will become increasingly important as more professionals can choose to live and work anywhere. This will involve more than big projects, as people consider the quality of education, public safety, health care, and more.

“Greater Des Moines remains on the top of lists for best places to live, but the political environment must continue to focus on collaboration and creating a welcoming place,” said Byers. A continued focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion and on building the next generations of leaders who are focused on the region’s future are also critical.

ARTS & CULTURE

The outbreak of COVID-19 halted most travel and leisure activities and forced 97% of Iowa’s arts, culture, and heritage organizations to cancel events.

“In terms of employment, no other industry was hit harder at the start of the pandemic than the leisure and hospitality, which includes arts and cultural venues and experiences,” said Sally Dix, Executive Director of Bravo Greater Des Moines. “Arts, entertainment, and performing arts sectors lost half their workforce and have yet to recover.”

This greatly impacted the hotel-motel taxes Bravo Greater Des Moines collected in 2020 to support arts, culture, and heritage organizations at a time when those organizations were also facing losses in earned and contributed revenue from other sources.

Despite the loss of tax revenue, Bravo awarded \$2.4 million to 65 organizations in March 2021, the most it’s ever invested in a six-month period to help offset losses to the sector.

“Ensuring that arts and culture organizations continue to thrive is vital to the region’s quality of life and economic success,” said Dix. While venues are reopening and the community is beginning to gather again, it will take time for cultural venues and experiences to rebuild.

Still, Dix remains impressed by the way many organizations pivoted. “I am inspired by the creativity of the community we serve,” she said. “Very few said, ‘We can’t do anything.’ Most were creative and came up with new ways to deliver on their missions.”

WITH GRATITUDE

With tremendous gratitude, we acknowledge the many individuals and organizations who gave their time, expertise, voice, and passion to serve those in crisis and to make our community stronger.

Thank you to the Disaster Recovery Fund COVID-19 Grantmaking Committee for listening to our community and making strategic decisions to help address incredible challenges. Thank you to the many leaders who provided input and helped create the Disaster Recovery Fund, so we could respond quickly and effectively.

Thank you to the many nonprofit leaders who shared their stories and demonstrated how we can better work together to ensure that all central Iowans thrive.

Thank you to the many generous organizations and individuals who elevated the nonprofit sector's response.

