

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

DATE: March 19, 2021

TO: Supervisor Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Shakita LaGrant McClain, Director, Department of Health and Human Services
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SUBJECT: An informational report from the Director, Department of Health and Human Services, providing an update on CARES allocations for Community Resilience and Mental Health

Background

Historically, inequities have been driven by explicit and implicit racist policies and practices at the local, state and federal government levels to advantage white people and to disadvantage people of color. According to research, “health disparities, differences in treatment access, living conditions, health literacy, language, immigration status, risk perceptions, and confidence in the government's ability to respond could exacerbate risks for particular populations.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened pre-existing racial inequities by compounding challenges experienced by many who reside in Milwaukee County. Disparate rates of infection and death in communities where people of color live also illuminate longstanding structural inequities. In order to address the impacts on health due to COVID-19, three funds were established to provide time-limited funding to support community and neighborhood efforts focused on responding and healing from the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19: Community Resilience Fund, Mental Health Fund and Food Program Fund.



Milwaukee County has committed to addressing racism, a public health crisis. DHHS leadership continues to address social determinants of Health (SDoH) and seeks to advance racial and health equity through the work it does internally with its operations and externally with its participants, contracted provider organizations, system and community partners.

DHHS was tasked with developing a process to assist community members access resources which met their basic needs (food, diapers, etc.) and to “invest upstream to address root causes of health disparities” by partnering with and allocating a portion of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) funds, awarded to Milwaukee County by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. Initial guidance released by the Treasury indicated that the funding can only be used to cover costs that:

1. Are necessary expenditures incurred due to the public health emergency
2. Were not accounted for in the budget most recently approved as of March 27, 2020
3. Were incurred during the period that begins March 1, 2020 and ends on December 30, 2020

Community Resilience Fund

This fund built upon federal guidelines and extended the opportunity for groups and organizations which align with three criteria: a) Excluded by other COVID-19 funding opportunities including undocumented immigrants and refugees (but not limited to); b) Work with essential workers without health supports, childcare, and other necessary services; and c) Serves groups who are experiencing disparate health impacts (communities of color, individuals with differing disabilities, aging individuals, etc.)

Not only does this fund support the countywide strategic direction, it also aligns with national objectives to improve health and well-being by addressing SDoH over the next decade known as Healthy People 2030. This fund specifically focused on enhancing communities’ ability for greater resilience in four areas:

- Service delivery
- Education & awareness
- Community capacity building
- Systems improvement and other improvements



Community Resilience is defined as “helping people get the social support they need in the places where they live, work, learn, and play.” Support efforts aimed to increase positive relationships in households, within workplaces, and in the community, which in turn reduce the negative impacts of COVID-19 and related factors which contribute to health disparities. Milwaukee County DHHS partnered with Community Advocates (subrecipient which served as a fiscal agent for community organizations) to award \$825,000 to support the following types of initiatives and projects, critical for improving health and well-being:

- Health communications
- Nutrition and healthy eating
- Youth empowerment
- Access to broadband internet
- Programming for aging adults in Milwaukee County Latinx Communities
- Housing and food insecurities
- Basic essentials such as diapers, feminine hygiene products and clothing
- Increased testing for COVID- 19
- Technical assistance for system improvements
- Expanded direct services for injury prevention (e.g. domestic violence)

The following organizations were awarded funds:

- The Asha Project
- Black Health Coalition of Wisconsin, Inc.
- Test Up MKE
- QDC Research and Policy Consulting Group LLC
- Lovell Johnson Quality of Life Center
- INPOWER
- Jump at the Sun
- Greater Milwaukee Center for Health Education and Prevention Inc.
- Latino Chamber of Commerce of SEW
- CORE El Centro
- Forward Latino, Inc.
- Clarke Square Neighborhood Initiative
- Walker’s Point Center for the Arts
- United Community Center
- Hispanic Collaborative
- Mental of America of SEW
- Milwaukee Diaper Mission
- Health Connections Inc.

Mental Health Fund

An allocation of \$1.6 million was expended for public health services, specifically mental and behavioral health services for populations that are impacted by COVID-19. There has been an increased demand of public health services from existing and new clients who are experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety from impacts related to COVID-19. This need has been demonstrated in part by an increase in calls to suicide prevention hotlines, 211 Impact and requests for other services such as housing, food/ personal needs, and healthcare. For example, approximately a 16.2 percent increase in calls to suicide prevention hotlines has been recorded

since the stay-at-home order was put in place. Milwaukee County's homicide and domestic violence abuse rates have followed similar rates of intensification.

Concerted efforts to diversify the vendors and engage woman-led, minority, veteran and LGBTQ+ providers were also employed to advance racial and health equity. The following types of initiatives and projects, critical for improving mental/ behavioral health and well-being, were funded:

- Public Education/ Social Marketing
- Translation, Printing and Direct Mail to ensure community members are aware of available resources and services provided by Milwaukee County and community organizations
- Support for uninsured individuals due to unemployment as a result of COVID-19
- Suicide Prevention strategies (e.g. gun locks, awareness podcast, etc.)
- Culturally responsive coaching for DHHS employees who work directly with community members impacted by COVID-19
- Materials and infrastructure
- Winter gear and clothing
- Life skills, emotional intelligence, mindfulness and coping strategies
- Community healing therapy sessions were offered virtually or in community-based settings, while adhering to social distancing and health requirements, which were facilitated by culturally relatable leaders who are experienced and trusted community members. The therapy sessions addressed increased grief, loss, sadness and depression that has been experienced in Milwaukee County communities of color due to the disparate rates of COVID-19 infection and death.

The following organizations were awarded funds:

- Be Inspired Works, Inc.
- Muslim Community & Health Center
- Outreach Community Health Center
- All 4 Kidz, Inc.
- Blaquesmith Consultative Services
- True Skool
- Balanced Mental Health and Wellness
- Mental Health America of SEW
- Miracle Network
- Safe & Sound, Inc.
- Amri Counseling Services
- TTJ
- Ma'Ruf Center for Youth Innovation
- Sky Schools Milwaukee
- Bayview High School
- City of Light Church
- Health Connections, Inc.
- St. A's
- TransCenter for Youth, Inc.
- My Sistas KeepHer
- Walnut Way
- MKE Turners
- Heal the Hood
- Joyce's House
- City Press Graphic Communications

Mental Health Civic Response Team Partnership

Milwaukee County DHHS partnered with philanthropic, intergovernmental, system and community leaders established to organize the prioritization of resources (dollars, volunteers, and in-kind goods & services) to respond to priorities and opportunities flowing from the COVID-19 crisis in the Milwaukee Area. Six “Civic Response Teams” were developed to address leading priorities that were elevated by leaders and people who live in Milwaukee County: a) Early Childhood Education; b) K-12 Schools; c) Food; d) Shelter/Housing; e) Physical Health; and f) Mental Health.

Through this partnership, which also included the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, a rapid application and review process was created and included public participation in the selection process. DHHS also partnered with Hope House (subrecipient who served as a fiscal agent for community organizations) to ensure the community organizations received capacity building support and were able to receive funds prior to the original December 30 deadline for expenditure of the CARES funding. Through this partnership, \$600,000 of the Mental Health fund was allocated.

Food Programs Fund

In Milwaukee County, we experienced a series of peaks regarding basic needs, such as food, formula and diapers, personal care items, healthcare, housing and utility assistance during dates which correspond to social distancing orders, the end of the stimulus payments, and the end of supplemental unemployment insurance payments.

According to Feeding America, “the majority of network food banks report seeing a record increase in the number of people needing help. Food banks see an average increase of over 55 percent more of our neighbors visiting food banks than before the pandemic. Roughly 4 in 10 people visiting food banks had not received food assistance before the pandemic.”

To address the increased demand food pantry operators experienced, an allocation of \$1.4 million was made to increase food security across the County. Specifically, Milwaukee County allocated \$686,411 to Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin, and \$752,370 to the Hunter Task Force. These two allocations are described in additional detail below.

Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin

Milwaukee County allocated \$686,411 to Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin to enhance the infrastructure of and capacity of the emergency food bank network. For example, the funds enabled the installation of a full walk-in freezer and walk-in cooler in the Feeding America warehouse. The addition of more cold storage is vital to keeping up with the drastic increase in

demand and the corresponding increase in the amount of food the organization are sources and distributes to the Milwaukee County community.

In addition, Feeding America invested in transportation and technology needs for its pantry members in Milwaukee County. These funds allowed them to purchase three Ford Transit cargo vans for members and additional technology such as laptops and WIFI hotspots. These types of investments have been particularly useful due to the pandemic to accommodate the increase in need, distribute food and to ensure food network members can efficiently and accurately use our online systems to order food, track it, communicate with the organization, and perform data collection. These systems allow them to gather better data about who is hungry in Milwaukee County and what the emergency network needs in order to provide equitable access to healthy food.

This program works to advance racial equity and inclusion because it provides access to a basic need (food) that is difficult to obtain in many neighborhoods because of a history of systemic racism in Milwaukee. Many Milwaukee neighborhoods with predominantly Black populations are also considered food deserts – a neighborhood with little access to fresh fruit, vegetables, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers. Low-income residents are especially vulnerable in food deserts, as traveling to find healthy, affordable food can be difficult if not impossible due to time and expense. This project works to provide reliable access to healthy emergency food to provide Milwaukee County families the food they need to thrive.

Hunger Task Force

Milwaukee County allocated \$752,370 to the Hunter Task Force to purchase refrigerated cargo vans, portable heaters and miscellaneous COVID-related food distribution equipment/supplies for 42 emergency food pantries; and commercial grade equipment to improve kitchen facilities for two soup kitchens. In addition, the Hunger Task Force purchased a semi-tractor to move, hold and deliver food across the County as well as PPE, plastic bags, clamshells, and boxes for redistribution within our network.

Acting as an administrative agent, Hunger Task Force increased the capacity of smaller non-profit organizations to obtain, store and safely distribute supplies of emergency food and commodity foods throughout the pandemic. The cargo vans which were gifted to established food pantries operating with rental vehicles or borrowed volunteer vehicles made a huge difference in stabilizing operations. The portable heaters were especially important in December-February as the state mandated outdoor food distributions. Improving the safe food handling at Center for Veterans Issues and Unity Soup Kitchen will have lasting impacts for homeless people.

Hunger Task Force qualifies local organizations for receipt of food, training them in safe food handling and fair treatment of people. Once qualified, these organizations become part of a continuously supplied safety net of services assuring that low-income people across Milwaukee

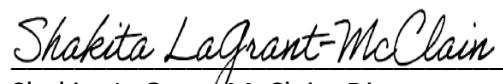
County obtain equal access to healthy foods in the neighborhood or community where they reside. Money spent on infrastructure will have lasting impact for these groups.

These expenditures advance racial equity by ensuring that people of color, migrants and immigrants are served equally because the food pantry they rely upon has been supplied equally with food. Because Hunger Task Force is free, no food pantry is charged for receipt or delivery of food. As a result, people visiting the Amani Community Food Pantry will receive the same amounts, types, and quality of food as people visiting a pantry in other communities.

Regarding health equity, Hunger Task Force demonstrates its core values of dignity and stewardship by assuring that all foods distributed are USDA Grade A. Meats are lean, vegetables and fruit are fresh; if canned, veggies are unsalted and fruit is in its own juice. Hunger task Force adopted the USDA MyPlate initiative more than four years ago and assures that the emergency food pantries, soup kitchens and homeless shelters we support received only healthy food, and that the food distributed represents breakfast, lunch, supper, and healthy snacks. As a result, Milwaukee County is the first County in the nation to offer only healthy foods through its food bank.

Recommendation

This report is informational, and no action is required.



Shakita LaGrant-McClain, Director
Department of Health and Human Services

cc: County Executive David Crowley
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