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In a time of isolation, Minnesotans must unite to support those who need our help

By Acooa Ellis | 09:52 am

We can't be physically close to one another right now, but that doesn't mean we can't be there to support others.

Greater Twin Cities United Way partners with 95 direct service organizations across the metro area – 25 of these organizations work specifically to advance economic opportunity for Minnesotans facing financial crisis. Needs are particularly heightened right now, but we are strengthened and elated by the thousands of people stepping up to volunteer with our 211 resource helpline (211) or through donations.

In this time of need, Minnesota's nonprofits have pulled together to provide critical services for our state's health and well-being. Many Minnesotans in low-wealth households face loss of income as we all take measures to reduce risks to health and our healthcare system. Closures of restaurants, small business and other employers have put hourly workers in challenging positions when it comes to paying rent, mortgages and bills.

Immediate support

In what can feel like a time of isolation, we must unite to support those who need our help. That's why we created the Greater Twin Cities COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund. Contributions to the fund provide immediate support such as food, shelter, child care, sanitary and hygiene supplies



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and financial assistance to those most vulnerable to issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. 100% of donations go directly into the community. Contributions can be made online at gtcuw.org.

Greater Twin Cities United Way's 211 resource helpline is also an important resource. Our 211 staff and volunteers provide referrals to health care services, child care, food, transportation, utility assistance, and eviction prevention. Callers also can get information on mental health counseling, job training and substance use recovery.

The 211 resource helpline also provides us with data to help identify and address emerging needs.

The chart below shows rent assistance referrals made by 211 helpline specialists for five Twin Cities metro counties during the last two weeks of March 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. In the last two weeks of March 2020, our 211 team referred callers from Hennepin and Ramsey Counties to rent assistance resources at a much higher volume than last year, but that need wasn't contained just to what we think of as the core cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, it also extended into the suburbs. We are seeing staggering increases in rent assistance referrals to callers from Dakota, Washington, and Anoka Counties.

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This increase in requests for rental assistance is concerning because it indicates a significant increase in individuals and families at risk of housing instability, and that this is a growing issue. This increase in referrals is a nod to trouble on the horizon.

Two recommendations for Walz and the Legislature

Gov. Tim Walz and the Legislature have worked together to take early action to support nonprofits and the people we serve during this crisis, but more needs to be done. We would like to highlight two specific recommendations:

- **Creation of a Nonprofit Recovery Fund.** Thus far, actions have wisely been focused on the immediate term. However, it's clear this crisis will impact individuals and families well after the state's peacetime emergency ends. A Nonprofit Recovery Fund would help address those mid- to longer-term needs, including job training and reentry, stable housing, and mental health support.
- **Significant investment in emergency funding for the Family Homeless Prevention and Assistance Program (FHPAP).** FHPAP is an extremely important program that can be used for direct assistance – such as rent, utilities and other expenses – or services like housing search or navigation for low-wealth families and individuals at imminent risk of homelessness. The need for emergency FHPAP funding is supported by a wide variety of organizations, including the Homes for All statewide coalition and the Minnesota Multi-Housing Association.

As our community navigates the COVID-19 crisis, Greater Twin Cities United Way is committed to supporting those impacted by its effects and bringing the community together in the face of this unprecedented pandemic. We invite you to join us by taking action in solidarity with our neighbors who need our help now more than ever. Find out how at gtcuw.org.

Acooa Ellis is senior vice president of community impact at Greater Twin Cities United Way.

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