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# Fairfield County nonprofits report increased need for food assistance



Volunteers load food into waiting vehicles during the weekly CT Food Bank/Foodshare food donation at Calf Pasture Beach, in Norwalk, Conn. Feb. 17, 2021.

Photo: Ned Gerard / Hearst Connecticut Media

Many area nonprofits saw the need to shift their focus over the last year to critical needs for food and other necessities as a result of the pandemic, even as their fundraising was ground to a halt in the beginning.

At the same time, many of these groups also incurred new expenses and had to provide new or more frequent services to clients themselves.

This insight comes from the Fairfield County Community Foundation's recent survey of 154 organizations awarded COVID-19 Resiliency Fund Grants last year. The Foundation awarded \$1,908,500 to organizations across Fairfield County. The survey looked at both how these organizations used the funds and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted them as a whole.

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Mendi Blue-Paca, Fairfield County Community Foundation's chief community impact officer, said the group's overarching goal is to close the achievement gap in Fairfield County with a focus on education, workforce opportunities and training, the success of women and girls, immigrant support and affordable housing. But as it's done to many other nonprofits, COVID has made the group shift its focus to addressing urgent needs.

"In many ways the survey was a confirmation of organizational and critical community needs we suspected were happening," said Blue-Paca. "One big takeaway is that our basic needs infrastructure has been greatly strained by the pandemic. This is something we knew but...the fact that food and basic needs, which includes things like income replacement and housing, rose to the top tells you this was a moment that really strained a lot of our basic systems."

While the survey is only a limited snapshot featuring organizations which received Resiliency Fund Grants, it reflects larger trends. Nearly a quarter of the

organizations who received these grants put the money towards addressing food insecurity, something that's been on the rise throughout the state since the pandemic hit last March and another 29 percent cited food as the number one critical and pressing pandemic-related need in the community.

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### **What's the need?**

22 percent of Fairfield County Community Foundation COVID-19 Resiliency Fund Grants went towards food and basic needs

42 percent of funds went toward people who are low income/economically vulnerable

94 percent of nonprofits who received a grant said COVID-19 has negatively impacted their organization in at least one way

81 percent they incurred new expenses because of COVID

68 percent said they began providing new or more frequent services

64 percent reported a budget gap due to COVID

40 percent said financial sustainability was their most critical challenge they faced due to the pandemic

36 percent said they'd put additional funds toward basic needs and emergencies

Source: Fairfield County COVID-19 Resiliency Fund survey

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Another 15 percent of organizations used the grant money for education/technology to help families when schools went remote. Some of the other top uses included personal protective equipment, medical supplies, housing and direct financial assistance.

Overall the funds benefited 100,039 individuals which included 19,204 youths and 42 percent of whom were considered low income or economically vulnerable.

Ninety-four percent of organizations who responded to the survey also said

COVID-19 has negatively impacted them in some way: 81 percent said they've incurred new expenses while 68 percent had to provide new or more frequent services.

FaithActs for Education, a Bridgeport-based nonprofit which also works in New Haven and Hartford, usually focuses on building community engagement around issues of education through church communities. But founding Executive Director Jamilah Prince-Stewart said they began to address food insecurity after seeing its members beginning to experience this last March.

"When the pandemic started, the first thing we did was reach out and listen to our people to see what they needed," Prince-Stewart said. "It was very clear folks were food insecure."

Many members also reported issues with housing security and remote learning. With the help of a \$17,000 COVID-19 Resiliency Fund Grant, FaithActs for Education was able to raise over \$312,000, \$190,000 of which was distributed to over 1,100 families in the form of Stop and Shop gift cards to help address food needs. They also partnered with churches to help them provide resources to those in need.

This was all in addition to FaithActs for Education's normal advocacy work. The group just expanded their services in a time of need, Prince-Stewart said.

"We really pushed to make sure we were giving direct aid to people and applying for funds we could give directly to families," Prince-Stewart said. "We are not a direct service organization. We don't do direct service. We do advocacy and community organizing. Direct service work is important but completely beyond our normal scope and vision. A lot of people had to pivot. I wouldn't say what we were doing was pivoting. We were adding onto the work we were doing."

Community Centers Inc., an organization dedicated to helping those in need in Greenwich, made a similar expansion, according to Executive Director Gaby Rattner. The group began a food distribution program with the COVID-19 Resiliency Fund Grant as a response to community needs. This, along with other COVID response measures like free learning pods for students in distance learning,

have become a critical part of their work.

“We changed our services to fit the need,” Rattner said. “We were never a food distribution center. Occasionally if we had families in need, we’d help them at Thanksgiving or Christmas but this was not something we ever did...It’s become a critical part of what we’re doing during COVID. It’s not the only thing we’re doing but it’s what we knew what we had to do.”

Like many other organizations, Community Centers Inc. also felt a financial impact from COVID. According to the Fairfield County Community Foundation survey, 64 percent of nonprofits who participated reported a budget gap due to the pandemic. Seventy-seven percent said they had to cancel a major fundraiser. Other budget gaps came from increased or unexpected costs from having more clients, having to purchase PPE and paying staff extra for overtime or quarantine pay.

Rattner said Community Centers Inc. offers all programs free, but with the cancellation of their anniversary and spring golf fundraiser, they lost a third of their income. The grants offered by the Fairfield County Community Foundation were a big help, she said, because they came early on while the organization was still figuring out how to fundraise virtually.

“Losing a third of our revenue was devastating though and we weren’t alone,” Rattner said. “This is before we became adept at virtual fundraising. We realized a lot of our clients who suffered food insecurity were about to be in substantially worst state.”

At least 40 percent of organizations responding to the Fairfield County Community Foundation survey said financial sustainability was the number one critical challenge they faced due to the pandemic, along with reaching clients while maintaining social distance.

“There are tons of impacts,” Blue-Paca said. “Organizations have had to reshape the way they function. IT requires tremendous operational pivots. We’ve seen everything shaken up. That’s born out of increased demand for services from people who never stood in food lines. We’re seeing organizations completely run by volunteers realizing they have no one to help with services. We’ve seen financial

hardships for places.”

The Fairfield County Community Foundation announced on Feb. 16 they’ll be accepting applications through March 19 for a fifth grant funding round from the Fairfield County COVID-19 Resiliency Fund. Blue-Paca said she predicts there will be less of a need for education support and technology this round, but a continued need for help in food and other necessities.

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