

# *John Muir Community Health Fund*

## *Findings: COVID-19 Response Conversations*

*May 2020*

### **Introduction**

John Muir Community Health Fund (CHF) has provided \$150,000 in basic-needs grants to support local groups (mostly current grantees) as an initial emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis. Working from a strengths-based philosophy, CHF is now seeking to identify longer-term supports it may be able to offer community organizations, leveraging the benefits of current changes made at local agencies. CHF engaged La Piana Consulting in April 2020 to conduct three small group conversations with ten of its partner organizations as a first step in identifying possible longer-term needs.

Participants included:

#### ***Immigrant and Crisis Services***

- Tom Tamura, Executive Director, Contra Costa Crisis Center (CCCC)
- Karen Ferguson, Executive Director, International Rescue Committee, Northern California Offices (IRC)
- Avi Rose, Executive Director, Jewish Family and Community Services East Bay (JFCS)

#### ***Food Providers***

- Trinh Nguyen, Director of College Advancement, Los Medanos College (LMC)
- Joel Sjostrom, President & Chief Executive Officer, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano (FBCCS)
- Robert Phelps, Executive Director, California State University East Bay's Concord Campus (CSUEB)
- Darice Ingram, Program Coordinator, Pioneers for H.O.P.E., California State University East Bay (CSUEB)
- Joleen Lafayette, Executive Director at Loaves and Fishes of Contra Costa (Loaves)

#### ***Senior Services***

- Nicole Howell, Executive Director, Ombudsman Services of Contra Costa and Solano Counties (Ombudsman CCSA)
- Verna Haas, Executive Director (retired), Contra Costa Senior Legal Services (CCSLs)
- Caitlin Sly, Executive Director, Meals on Wheels Diablo Region (MOWDR)

The small group discussion guide is included as Appendix A.

## Key Takeaways

Although participants identified a wide range of changes and needs as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, four issues were raised often, are particularly relevant, and represent potential changes that might bring positive, longer-term benefit:

- Technology and digital divide
- Blurred boundaries (shifting relevance of geographic boundaries, reduced barriers within organizations)
- Collective solutions
- Volunteer management (recruiting, supervising, working from home)

These areas are described in more detail below, as well as a summary of other issues identified.

### Technology and Digital Divide

As has been universally reported, stay-at-home orders have resulted in a boom in use of digital communications tools. This rapid change to digital programming and operations has also exacerbated the digital divide, or lack of access to technology based on income, ability, or geography.

A number of changes were identified in this area that are likely to continue. These could hold the potential for long-term benefit if properly designed.

Organizations are improving client access through adaptive technology.

*JFCS: The surprise is that some [change] has been better than expected. Primarily, many clients had access problems, challenges getting to the office. So, in pragmatic terms, [we've had better access for some people] like older adults with mobility issues or immigrants with kids coming to appointments.... The dynamic is different [virtually] and sometimes better. We won't switch to remote services all the time, but will have a more expansive our tool kit.*

*IRC: [Clients have had less transportation challenges, but [we've had to] do more work to [make sure] services are getting to clients. ... We have had plenty of support to get the hardware to clients, but the divide is exacerbated by connectivity issues. Right now Comcast is helping but what happens in the longer term when client don't have income and can't afford an internet bill?*

*CSUEB: We're walking through CalFresh applications directly [online with students]. ... Then we're connecting about other student needs: online cooking, healthy foods, social media. Two of our students are going to be a part of an online cooking class ... the chef will send ingredients and will cook online. ...*

*CSUEB: Through this we're connecting with online students [students who were attending the University online previous to the crisis] we wouldn't have connected with otherwise. We're getting a sense of students who might not have ever come to campus — who do we engage and how do we make sure they are getting services. The pantry was a place students came — we started with food, then talk about homelessness and other needs.*

Digital solutions may be one approach to mitigating distancing requirements once in-person activities resume. More generally, organizations will need to develop creative solutions to new challenges when face-to-face work starts up again.

*IRC: We didn't do too bad moving to remote. It will be harder to move back to partially in-person, with more deep cleaning, new supplies [personal protective equipment] needed to be handed out, and disposal. Or new client flows. We have Immigration drop-in hours on Mondays and our offices are really crowded. Or [when we have] eight people in a family. We will be too crowded. And how will we do temporary screening before folks even come into the office environment? We don't even have paid receptionists, let alone extra staffing to do this kind of screening.*

If organizations are able to identify good solutions to some challenges, the quality of programming and access could increase — especially when addressing issues related to the digital divide.

*MOWDR: We didn't really realize before this the need for seniors to have access to technology. That got us thinking more about how we can look for funding to provide people we serve with low cost internet, laptops, getting them tablets. How can we provide access to technology? And the crisis heightens on a societal level the situation of seniors as population most at risk with this. This has made everyone else think about what seniors go through, especially when it comes to social isolation.*

*CCSLs: We could even provide technology to use, but our clients don't have the education or experience to use the technology. These disparities are accentuated by the pandemic.*

*CSUEB: Also, this is equity issue. For example, many students depended on using a computer in the library. We've been able to respond to that in a way that helps short-term, but it's raised longer-term issues like what our computer loan program looks like and raising the conversation around equity. For example, should we fund a computer for every student? And with internet, several students don't have [access] at home, how do we get them hot spots?*

One caution, though, is that technology is not now — and may not be — a feasible work around for all programs. In addition to CCSLS, quoted below, IRC also needs to find ways for clients to sign documents going forward.

*CCSLs: An advance directive can be done [remotely], but it needs to be witnessed [in person]. We're not doing durable power of attorney [documents], that's estate planning, but without eyes on the client, you can't assess capacity. It's a real risk to not do a one-on-one conversation in-person. So, until we can use Zoom or have assurance that we're talking with someone with independence, we're putting a pause on those.*

## Blurred Boundaries

The move to more digital solutions is breaking down previously rigid boundaries. This is true in obvious ways — e.g., geographic limitations for program participants are less meaningful for online programs than they are for in-person gatherings. This is also true in less obvious ways, such as norms around staff gatherings or new interest in working across departments in larger organizations.

Examples of program or geographic boundaries blurring or dissolving:

*IRC: We have offices in Sacramento, Turlock, San Jose, Oakland. We went to 100% remote for all our client work by March 13 and were able to move all services including refugee arrival, pscho-social support, financial opportunities, digital inclusion. Each area has been able to redefine [its work] with COVID-19, so able to keep everything going. We do it all virtually with a small drop off in [client] numbers. But because all is virtual, boundaries have disappeared. For example, two offices were trying to get the same [type of group meeting online] and we realized we could do just one class. (In short, two offices didn't need to design the online program separately and participants, who had previously been geographically sorted, could come from multiple areas.)*

*JFCS: In some pieces of what we do ... we have a very set idea of our catchment area. But we have done things online and getting participants from god-knows-where. That's fine with me. If there's an isolated Afghan woman in Kansas, then, yes!, have her connect!*

### Examples of internal boundaries blurring:

*JFCS: We do some really different things: refugees, seniors, early childhood. The [crisis] has blurred some of the departmental lines. We're working together and cooperating better. Food delivery or emergency assistance has forced [staff] to work together. Or [led to cross organizational training, for example] someone in one department walked through the unemployment claims process online [with all staff]. So, we're driven by the common purpose.*

*Loaves: It's brought us closer: we all operate like a little island [at each food delivery site]. Now we're working as a team — that's a positive.*

*JFCS: We have 70 staff, so don't meet face-to face very often ... but now we've [all] been meeting on Zoom weekly and we'll continue to use Zoom when we return to "normal."*

*MOWDR: Everyone jumped in, rose to the challenge, and in a twisted way it was real life team building. We responded to a crisis and feel that we did so successfully, with teamwork, with people stepping up. We got to know each other more quickly than we would have. That's connected us all working together on one team — I want to keep that. And staff is helping each other out.*

*CSUEB: we have our Osher Lifelong Learning (55+). It's never been online before. We're desperately putting all of it online, creating tutorial for seniors to use Blackboard learning, etc. If we had healthy cooking classes online, couldn't we turn that over [to Osher students] or to matriculated students. A lot of course content has been siloed but we can leverage online course content across departments.*

### Collective Solutions

Several organizations spoke to opportunities for collective solutions. The primary example identified by several leaders is around food delivery. As organizations respond to the needs of their clients to get food, they have either started their own delivery efforts — even if that is not a core competency — or begun to partner with others.

*LMC: Before COVID we were all working in our own bubbles. We had all the tools we needed on campus. But now, as we're more isolated, there's a need to reach out and get more folks involved, to team up. We can't do this alone. We can't feed our students effectively by doing it*

alone — there's more openness to [try new ideas to serve by working with partners]. I see that a lot more. And we're more efficient remotely. We get on Zoom, talk about what we need to talk about, then we're done to go to next meeting. ... [An example of this is] once per month on Thursday we have the Food Bank come, their truck full with fresh foods. That's open to the community. We've done that twice. We had 700 families show up last Thursday, people come in cars with a line going around the campus. People come early ... approximately 1500 people. There's definitely a need. This [role serving the community] is new to LMC. ... Our college doesn't have the capacity to do this on our own. So, partnering up to serve particular needs is really important to doing our work more effectively in the community. We would love to continue to partner with the food bank and doing more ... in the community.

JFCS: We've added services we haven't done before, like food delivery. We had a ton of volunteers shopping, getting groceries to people, and distributed food that Tom's crew [at the Crisis Center] made available. As things are settling down, we're getting more selective, delivering only to people with no options due to their risk factors or mobility issues.

IRC also increased food delivery as well as emergency funds: rental assist, medical supplies, paying utilities.

CSUEB: We have a great relationship with Food Bank for grab and go groceries. We're also referring students to LMC [since our campus is closed].

FBCCS: There are lots of benefits in collaboration, like being on a call like this, working with elected officials and with food banks across the country, with other nonprofits, and with the schools. Or like with LMC and their drive-through distribution. These are new opportunities to partner. We want to leverage that and lean into that.

Loaves: I've thought we could do weekend meals in the to-go style [as a new program] to fill a gap. Or we could provide more food to our partners, maybe give CSUEB containers [for grab-and-go]. We could expand to-go style distribution in partnerships.

Loaves: We partnered with a restaurant that is providing 1,000 meals a week to Loaves. A new partner and unique, but a result of COVID-19.

JFCS: [Around food delivery], I'm not attached to doing that, it would be great if someone with a special focus on food delivery were able to expand to include our clients and volunteers.

Another identified food-related opportunity for collective work is around food education.

LMC: I have not done a demo or virtual cooking session online yet [but would be interested in developing this as co-learning with others.] ... I want to steal the virtual cooking demo. We're not that far [into this] yet, we need some time to figure out whatever creative things we can do.

Loaves: we have a free 12-week culinary program. Hearing about what everyone is doing online with online training, etc. That might be the future of our culinary program. CSUEB: I'd love to discuss that, we have been awarded grant dollars to do some of that work.

Collective solutions for issues beyond food were also identified in the discussions.

JFCS: On the financial assistance piece, a colleague agency [working in domestic violence] is having a hard time with it, so we'll do that work for their clients. We're sharing clients. When we work it out, it will reduce duplication of efforts.

CCSLs: *What has popped up are these neighborhood support [response efforts]. We already have all these systems, and everyone is reinventing these programs. But they don't vet, just neighbors helping neighbors — that is nice but can be rife with abuse. (This conversation continued, pursuing the idea that existing organizations with systems to recruit, vet, train, and supervise volunteers could provide this function.)*

CCSLs: *What we share [related to technology needs] is seniors and low-income individuals. It occurs to me where we could all have access to the same hub, a place where all service organizations speak to individuals, [where we serve the same location or the same people]. We could share investments there. We don't each need to buy our own hot spot and computer and take that to a location to reach seniors.... Just providing tech is not the full solution, many cannot use computers and can barely use cell phones. So maybe we have a packet we take to residential housing projects and we can set it up — but we need someone there [to manage and assist]. Individuals in their homes [will need assistance to use technology].*

Another possible opportunity for collective solutions is around creation and maintenance of resource lists.

CCCC: *In the midst of the crisis and post-crisis, everybody in good faith was creating resource lists. It's a worthy thing to do, but my push is to let us do that, let us manage that info for you and update that so we have comprehensive resources for the County, owned by the community.*

CSUEB: *We created a resource guide in response to COVID, but we'll keep that. We can connect students to other locations for themselves and their families [and link that to our overall interest in promoting wellness].... [To work on the resource guide] we partnered with Swipe Out Hunger and Hope Lab and also had multiple lists on our campus. We asked everyone to funnel those [existing lists] through us and we connected with other community programs.*

An outcome related to collective solutions is that of relationship development. Organizations are quickly developing new or deeper relationships with colleagues that they want to maintain as the crisis passes.

Ombudsman CCSA: *relationship with Public Health. I want to preserve our relationship [with the director of Public Health], and also with the people throughout the organization.... [We've been changing their perception of us, so they understand we are professionals. For example,] we can get data no one else can get. For example, on coronavirus [we got data around long-term care facilities], but I want Public Health involved so that we can improve the industry.*

Duplication of efforts was identified as one barrier to partnership efforts.

CCSLs: *One frustrating thing is how segmented the networks are. For example, we've been working for two years in an East Contra Costa coalition. We've had conversations with four foundations interested in funding [in the region], asking the communities there what are the needs, what are impediments. So that goes on with one set of funders and nonprofits, then there's another group mirroring [essentially duplicating] that conversation. I don't know if it's county-wide. All of us are supposed to serve the whole county. It's a funny dynamic. How could we be more efficient and integrated as a nonprofit community?*

## Volunteer Management

Many of the organizations have made major changes in recruiting, training, and supervising volunteers. One important change has been allowing volunteers to work from home.

*MOWDR: Our friendly visitor program was all in person with a tiny “friendly caller” program. We immediately shifted all friendly visitors to calls. We previously didn’t allow friendly callers to call from home and we immediately switched that to at home [providing enough information to the volunteer about the client for context while still protecting privacy] so they knew about the person they were calling. It made us think about why we do it all in-person usually.... We want to keep allowing friendly callers to call from home. Having fluidity between friendly callers and friendly visitors [has made us think about the mix between the two modes and ask] why do we only do our calls Monday through Friday 10:00-4:00? Why not evenings and weekends?*

*CCCC: We have 20 volunteers and half the staff working remotely, which technology allowed. That’s been really, really helpful.... We have never had volunteers work at home before. We’ve kept them near staff to answer questions. So, [in order for volunteers to work from home], we’ve included a chat function all the time for staff [to be available and make recommendations to volunteers real-time]. We lost older volunteers at first, have gotten them back with training.*

*JFCS: We have a ton of volunteers, and have long had a desire [to add more to our] older adults program. Now during the crisis, many new volunteers have come forward to support older adults stuck at home, and we hope that will continue.*

Additionally, IRC, FBCCS, and other organizations faced challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers. As FBCCS has revamped its volunteer sign-up system (and as other organizations, such as CSUEB have urged students to volunteer, naming the Food Bank as an option), they are now filling all volunteer opportunities. In addition to finding new ways to work, IRC also lacks staff to manage the volunteering system in a digital setting, making it difficult to tap into this resource to the extent it should be possible.

## Other Changes

Participants report a broad number of changes they have implemented in response to the current crisis. Several of these issues are described above. Following are additional changes identified through these conversations:

### Use of Space

With fewer staff and volunteers on site, the need for physical space has both changed and, in instances, been cut back.

*JFCS: Eventually we [will make a planned move to new offices] and be in a new space. We planned to use the space in a particular way, but our sense of space and how to use it has changed.*

*CCSLs: This experience has led me and our team and board to rethink what space requirements mean and whether or not we want to commit to a bigger space. With working from home, we might reconfigure our expectations.*

Several other organizations spoke about making it easier for staff to work from home in the future, primarily to support work-life balance when addressing staff’s parenting needs or extensive commutes.

Leaders think such efforts — along with allowing more volunteers to work from home — might reduce the need for paid office space. (As an aside, La Piana has spoken with at least two organizations outside of this process that are hoping to reduce on-site staff and co-share space in order to reduce office costs.)

## Efficiencies

*IRC: There are positives [to the crisis]. For example [our] financials work can't be paper based. So, we have moved to debit cards for all clients, have a stamp for check signing [and made the process overall more efficient].*

*Loaves: Our dining room managers say that the way we operate now [grab and go, rather than hot meals] is very efficient. Compared to what we usually do, there's no need to mop floors now, clean dishes, or deal with personalities. Operations are good [better now] for Loaves staff, but not for clients.*

*MOWDR: For our cafes, went to to-go meals at first. Then went to frozen meals for pick-up. But we quickly learned that we needed to deliver: clients couldn't leave and didn't want to leave their houses for pick up. So our café and home-delivered meal programs have (blurred together), it's nearly all home delivery now. [This group then talked about a desire to avoid differentiation in funding streams on a permanent basis so that this type of efficiency could be maintained.]*

## Scaling

New efficiencies, new systems, and changes in partnerships could allow for greater scaling.

*FBCCS: The mechanics of how we can analyze our operations and staffing to do more. [Consider] distribution boxes, scaling, produce bags [that take a lot of volunteers] — how can we scale that [and be efficient]?*

## Emergency Assistance

*CSUEB: Donors came out of the woodwork. They've come to us asking how they can support [students]. All of this started the same time CHF asked [about supports] and got us to start asking. For example, with our emergency assistance fund, we had \$135,000 in requests in ten days. We weren't expecting that. The level and intentionality of supporting our students I'd really, really like to keep. That is happening across lines — we have academic help lines, wellness help lines [linking students to emergency assistance].*

Other participants, including IRC, talked about increasing emergency assistance needs.

## Training

Some participants identified efforts to expand their skills as they adjust to the crisis. Support for training or linking individuals to resources could be helpful.

*LMC: I spend a lot of time fundraising for food pantry. This has allowed us to be more creative ... this time [during this crisis] has changed our way of working. I appreciate that. Prior to*



*COVID I spent a lot of time in the community, meeting face to face with donors, talking about the pantry's impact. Now we're forced to do everything remotely. Everything going online forces us to "self-teach," and raises a training need. For example, training about marketing and how to communicate with donors remotely and still get the impact across would help us get out of old routines and try new things.... Training and professional development [could help us] be more creative [and] effective.*

## Community Education and Media

Several groups said that the crisis provided an opportunity to increase public education around the issues they work on.

*CSUEB: For us, [we are] communicating around stigma [of food insecurity, homelessness, and related issues]. With COVID, people who were unwilling to be a part of that conversation are now forced to do that.*

*Ombudsman CCSA: We had started working with a marketing company and they have started to get attention around our COVID work.*

## Ongoing Learning

One issue raised was the need to maintain learning through the crisis. Organizations need to continue to monitor and analyze changes in the situation and be prepared to quickly make further adaptations.

*FBCCS: For challenges, what comes to mind is what are the new needs emerging? For example, with education and all the changes around online learning. What are these changes going to be long term on the campuses? There will be more online and less on-campus presence, so [does that mean] we go back to grab and go meals? And if unemployment is 12-18% for a long time, how does the Food Bank collaborate to solve those ongoing needs? It's interesting to think about how much students will be on campus or not.*

*CSUEB: We're running scenarios around social distancing, how it will change how many students we can serve on campus. We're running those scenarios, even though we don't know [what social distancing requirements might be] if we're allowed back.*

## Anticipated Crush Coming

Once the stay-at-home orders begin to ease, some groups expect a surge in service demand.

*CCSLs: We expect an explosion of court issues in June. People are pushing things off. For example, people are not paying rent, but that expense continues. That will end up in court case with a backlog into the Fall.*

## Program Shifts

Several organizations have redesigned their programs extensively or started working with different populations. For example, Ombudsman CCSA is working more extensively with families of facility residents and also identifying and advocating for facility needs. Organizations may want to consider how they will continue to cultivate these new relationships or roles after the crisis.

*Ombudsman CCSA: We were not allowed to enter [care] facilities, like everyone else. Now we only respond by phone, when families call, etc. We also reach out to facilities asking about PPE, their ability to isolate residents, etc. Early on we raised issues of facilities not being able to get food, or not having enough PPE. So our work changed and changed really quickly.*

## **Additional Challenge**

Although this issue did not fall within the structure of this effort, one issue is worth mentioning. Some of the participants spoke to the increase in requests from different types of institutions and elected officials to help learn more about COVID-19 impacts in the community and to engage in fact-finding and public-education efforts. The interest in generating more data or increasing understanding around the situation is understandable, but is an added stress when so much time is needed to address immediate needs — and to seek funding for those needs. Organizations have received extensive requests to create or share new information and participate in public forums, many of which duplicate efforts. This challenge may be driven by the absence of a strong coordinating body taking leadership through the crisis within various sectors.

## *Appendix A: Discussion Guide*

### *John Muir Community Health Fund COVID-19 Response – Small Group Discussion Guide*

*April-May 2020*

#### **Introduction**

John Muir Community Health Fund (CHF) has provided rapid relief grants to support many of its community partners through the initial stage of the COVID-19 crisis. It is now turning its attention to a longer-term response by looking for ways to build on the strengths its partners are displaying in this time. The purpose of this conversation is to better understand the positive changes CHF's partners are making — even if they are changes you have been forced to make — and how those changes may lead to ongoing benefits.


I will be facilitating three of these small group conversations. To be clear, these conversations are not confidential — I will be sharing what I learn with CHF. However, we want you to be open to new ideas or speculating without inhibition. To that end, please feel free to request that I keep specific thoughts and statements anonymous and I will do so. That said, there are several others participating in each conversation, so we ask everyone to respect confidentiality.

Following these conversations, La Piana will create a summary of findings — a summary of what we heard. We will circulate these findings for further input from you, then invite everyone to a video meeting with CHF to present and discuss what we learned. Based on what we learn, CHF will determine what next steps it might want to take.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

#### **Questions**

1. What are the specific changes your organization has made — or is making — in response to the epidemic? As a prompt, changes might include:
  - Client interactions
  - Staff interactions
  - Fundraising
  - Technology
  - Partnerships
  - Operational processes, e.g., budgeting and cash flow projections, project assignment, cross training, etc.
2. Which of these changes are bringing actual (or potential) positive benefits to your organization? Alternatively, which of these changes are things you might have done even without the crisis, or which are things you want to continue?

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3. As you listen to your peers, are they doing things that you'd like to try? Are there other things you want to try to change as you prepare for this "new normal"?
  4. If there are 1-2 changes you'd like to retain, expand, or begin, what are the types of barriers or challenges you see to achieving success? What types of supports would help you address those barriers?
  5. Is there anything you want to add to this conversation?